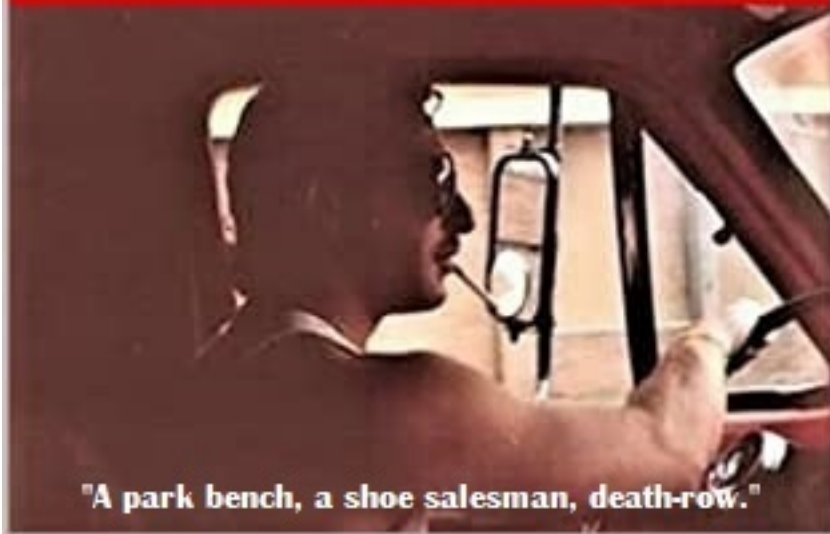


Arkay Trucking

Volume II

ROBERT I. KABAKOFF



"A park bench, a shoe salesman, death-row."

Arkay Trucking

Volume II

Robert I. Kabakoff

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**Dedicated to three fondly remembered fathers,
Michael Kempler, James Deodato and David Ansell,
with eternal gratitude and respect, I've not forgotten.**

Preface

Coming-of-age can be a lot of fun, but for many it's also a high-stakes trial. In my case, though there was a lot of excitement, adventure and even some joy, the pain and its impact drove me to get it all down as a way to make sense out of it, preserve the memories, create a record and maybe even exorcize it catharsis-style. Yes, growing up as a teenager in the seventies and as a young adult in the eighties is probably not a lot different than growing up any other time, except in the ways it was. This memoir would be about that, with one distinct caveat, I never really got there. Not then. In the first memoir, *Kabbo: Volume I*, the journey begins at fourteen with a trio of rebellious teenage runaways from summer camp and ends with the return from a cross-country solo adventure at nineteen. This story, *Arkay Trucking: Volume II*, told in flashback, begins where the first leaves off and ends at the very precipice of mortal existence. My teenage years and early twenties were a time of intense existential turmoil: drugs, alcohol, hospitals, heartbreaks, fistfights, journeys, the military, sexual abandon, incarceration, suicides, homelessness, and finally, at the brink of annihilation a shot at redemption. These are the tales of a troubled, young, Jewish American living in a post-hippie, *Clockwork Orange* meets *Al Capone* fantasy world and the people that impacted him, for better or worse, while trying to work things out by finding his place in the real world as he narrowly avoids the abyss.

Robert I. Kabakoff, Pokhara, Nepal, June 9th 2020

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Chapter I: *Aborted by a bullet*

"Voices inside my head - echoes of things that you said" – Zenyatta Mundatta, *The Police* (1980)



1981, sometime in mid-October, Rockville Center, Long Island, NY. *"It's easy to see where this line is headed."* The line the cop in the front passenger seat of the squad car was referring to was the line that tracked my steadily advancing criminal career. First up, the groundbreaking, cherry-popping harassment charge at fifteen, followed by a criminal mischief conviction, a burglary conviction, two or three misdemeanors in Florida if you count my alias, a DWI in Long Beach, a petty larceny in Oceanside conviction and a pot bust in Jamaica. All told up till then two felonies and an

assortment of colorful yet otherwise unremarkable misdemeanors. Now this: two, brand-spanking new felony charges. Like a Greek tragedy it was headed inexorably to homicide, where it seemed like there was nothing anybody, including myself could do about it. Homicide. The fates decreed it. I was gonna kill somebody, no way around that, it was only a matter of who, how and when, and just almost did. Close. Inches. Right up to the edge of the line. That's what had me cuffed in the backseat of the RVCPD cruiser when the dispatcher read out my rap sheet over the radio, prompting the observation made to the cop behind the wheel. Homicide. It was virtually a *fait accompli*. Had the gun not jammed while trying to chamber the second round, this time deciding to be far more reckless and far less deliberate in targeting, it just might have been then and there. Like I said, close. Real close. He might'a been dead, *morta*, instead of just humbled, brought down and scared out of his stupid wits. If he'd'a challenged me any further after that first and only intended warning shot, I'd'a been left with no other move, you put me in *check*? I put you in *mate*. That's how it goes. Game over.

Thankfully, that was all it took to get her out and him to back the fuck up. A single, well placed warning shot landing about two inches from his waist aimed into the hallway wall just inches behind him, spraying shattered fragments of concrete in a quick flash of bright blue-orange smoke and fire exploding from the barrel. Apparently that's what sawed-offs do, even a light weight .22, where inside a narrow apartment building stairwell with no space for the sound to escape the blast was ferocious and alarming even to me, but I was on the safe side of the action that time and so became immediately seduced by the heady, drunken rush of it all. This was fantastic, the power suddenly and undisputedly shifting from his hands to mine. *Bang!* The simple act of squeezing a trigger, a simple pull of a single finger producing a profound instance of existential, transcendent, triumph. Yes. That's all it took. We were looking directly at each other, eye contact as he issued one last taunt the split second before, then at the precise moment, aimed from the hip, exactly on target. A peak-moment for sure, and though heavily paid for remains one I'll never forget and only nominally regret. The second intended shot? Well, at this point, after absorbing the dose of exhilaration from the first, I was immediately overwhelmed and craved more, despite my objective having already been achieved but

needed another shot, pardon the pun. It was really quite intoxicating, witnessing all that 'John Wayne' make-believe bravado come pouring out of him as he turned instantly from bold, condescending, and cocky to pale, terrified into a frenzied, panicked retreat. Ha! Now what, *fuckface*? And you know what I say? Douchebag Jerry Lipton would have arguably deserved it, earned his slab in the morgue by putting his big, stupid, drunken mug between me and one from my stable, despite the fact that it was at her request. Traitorous bitch. What was he thinking? Didn't he know me? We were from the same town, the same street even. Of course he did. He knew well my reputation, as I did his. I was 'crazy,' reckless and dangerous, and he was bad and big, a barroom brawler, big as in one big pussy, acting the tough guy role only with those he thought he could beat. That's not tough. Tough is more like taking the risk you might have to pay a price, maybe even lose, but you go ahead anyway because there's a good enough reason, a reason worth the possible weight. That's balls. Without that, I don't care what you bench or how you're tattooed, spiked collared bulldogs and arrow clutching eagles, anchors and crossbones, a hollow charade dressed up in costume jewelry.

As a matter of record, I played make-believe tough guy too, as Kabbo then, and Arkay Trucking now, still the same desperado lunatic though, the pretender as always, but just as before, the big difference being, I was really and actually willing to take the risk of possibly throwing it all away just to make my point and you suffer. Risk. What are you putting on the table? For me? The answer was even more now. Older? Yes, but wiser? Nyet. No more high school shenanigans, no more Alex the cruel and reckless Droog, now I was Al Capone, "*Sure I got a racket. Everybody's got a racket. Only me, I don't hurt nobody. Only them what gets in my way,*" the boss, self-assured, merciless and deadly. He should have just told her: it's between you and Rob, don't get me involved, but instead jerkoff decided to play superhero at my expense, another foolish and unwarranted betrayal. Who was she to him? Until then they'd never spent five minutes with each other while I was his every day neighbor, occasional employer, and quasi-friend since high school. Anyway, I wasn't having it. Not then, not there, not him. None of it. Fuck that and fuck her too. Welcome to Custer's last stand, Douchebag, you're the guest of honor.

This particular drama began earlier that evening on another line at the supermarket where he and I went to buy the beer for the party we were hosting for chubby Leanne and her coven of fertile femme fatales, about a half dozen of them, with only us three guys available, me, Douchebag, and his third-cousin, half-retarded, red-headed and full-bearded, inbred, step-child of a roommate. That was the deal, it was his apartment, we split the cost of the beer, and the ladies were provided by my current number one lady, Leanne, who I satirically dubbed Buttercup, like a 1950s TV show. His account opened earlier that evening as we stood side by side at the checkout counter where a case or two of Bud was ready to roll, the six-foot plus Douchebag used his height and weight leverage to give me a forceful enough shove, pushing on my shoulder to knock me slightly off balance in front of the pretty cashier girl. He thought it was cute, playful, his way of showing off. Some stunt, a monumental achievement in his little world of cheap macho posturing, backed up by the dynamic trio of stupidity and arrogance disguising cowardice. He thought it was funny, fun to humiliate me. I laughed it off outwardly, like a shared joke. *Ha! Ha! Look at me! I'm a wobbly weeble! Weebles wobble but they don't fall down.* But inside, he just sealed his fate, marking himself for payback. Getting bullied always inspired me to hate, and hate generally inspired me to act. Turn your other cheek if you think it's right, go for it, but not me. I go for vengeance (or, if you prefer, justice), cold if possible but always righteous and always sweet. Look, I'm no saint or martyr nor do I aspire to be. Rather, I was human, maybe all too much so, a brutalized child reveling in his abundant and varied flaws: paranoia breeding a persistent persecution combined with a so-called Napoleon complex powering a passion for payback top among them, always looking to get even with anybody for anything, didn't matter what or who. All that was needed was the right opportunity, wait and watch, keeping alert and staying focused. It might take some time, considerable time, could be years, but whenever it comes, like this time, now, sooner than expected, later that night after Buttercup gave him her marching orders, telling him to not let me back into his apartment, the time had come. Drunk and fatalistic, here it came, my opportunity, or excuse, so jumped right on board with both feet. *"Leenanne doesn't want you back in here."* Really? Are you sure, asshole? Okay then, here we go, this is it, denying me access, backstabbing me, yeah, okay, it's fine, Little Big Horn coming' our way. Her

reasoning and motive were also vengeance, payback for my steady "cheating" on her with many of my, in her words *"hot numbers."* Truth be told (and why not?), I never did or ever even said anything to lead her or anybody else to believe there was any kind of monogamy goin' on, there wasn't, and at just twenty-two, there certainly didn't need to be, instead I had a full and dynamic stable of young and eager playmates, rotating them regularly as appetites and schedules dictated, variety and spice, as they say. She was perhaps in the top three, a little chubby but very pretty and a great, repeat great lay, still and all though just one of many, maybe a dozen or so, give or take, linin'm up and beddin'm down. No one was exempt from my amorous attentions, not neighbors, not co-workers, not strangers on the streets, not even my mother's friends. It was the eighties, before AIDs and just after the eruption of promiscuity brought on by the "sexual revolution" of the sixties and the decadence of the follow up seventies, and again, in my prime, not bad looking, with my own business and a very healthy appetite for the ladies, well, monogamy was never on the table. Not even on the menu. She, however, as great a lay as she was thought otherwise. Crazy bitches. Since Eve, Delilah, and Pandora, the ruination of many a good and not-so-good man. Even the mighty Arkay Trucking.

The Douchebag, a high school varsity athlete cum town bully, just discharged from the military, airborne, was a well-known gin mill bouncer about two years my senior, damn near a head taller and at least fifty pounds heavier, light-heavyweight, mostly muscle, who had up until that moment been my quasi-friend and the local neighborhood pal I recently hired as security man for a summer party me and my kid sister threw in our backyard, even helping me out (for pay) in my just started trucking business. It was all good until he told me, upon returning to the party from driving her girlfriends to a dance club (they asked me to deliver them because of a lack of men-folk for them to be fought over), *"Leanne doesn't want you back in,"* then shutting the door in my face, changed everything. Leanne doesn't want me back in there? And you're on her side? Leanne gives you orders? No way. Not tonight, jack-ass. So let's see how that works out for us. A two-fisted, double-barreled betrayal. She for her reasons and he for his, whatever they were, probably just drunk and stupid, reason enough common in his world. Anyway, that's what I bought the rifle for, a

showdown. Someone had to go. I didn't know exactly who at the time of the purchase a few months before, but I knew for sure it was gonna come in handy, and probably sooner rather than later, sawing off the barrel to a two-inch nub, filing down the serial numbers (no idea why I did that), and cutting the back end off the stock so it could be somewhat concealed. Death wish, mine I guess, but determined to take some lucky contestant with me. That's the way it goes when you imagine yourself a protégé of Al Capone. You gotta' make your bones, and it was Jerry's traitorous choice that put his bones in the cross hairs.

Even so, my deliberate actions were carefully measured. At first, with the door slam, I knew this was it, D-Day, so headed downstairs to my sub-ground level, half-painted studio to get the magic power-tool, then return up the stairs to the third floor with it in my front pants waist, jacket open so it could be seen without actually brandishing, step by step, to confront him and get her out, cost what it may. Emphasis from the voice *on cost what it may*. She was coming out of there. At the moment it seemed like my entire life up 'til then was leading to this, my father planting the seed in my young mind way back when, early childhood, that I would inevitably end up on 'death row,' where like in a classical Greek tragedy, there was no way to stop it. Every road taken from any direction led to exactly the same place. Homicide. If I had to send him to Smithereens to achieve my end, then so be it. That's where he'd go, a one-way express ticket. The fates were deciding, we were just being dragged along for the ride, whichever scenario brought me there, and this apparently was it, a double-barreled betrayal, so in a word, justified. I could live with it if I had to, even behind bars, maybe even for a spell on death row before they hit the switch. There was never any choice. So, happy now, Dad? This one's for you.

There he stood in the hallway on the upper landing between the second and third floor, watching, almost waiting for me to ascend up from the ground floor and arrive. I had no idea why he left the sanctuary of his apartment, but it played perfectly into my hands, not even having to knock on his door. "*I want Leanne out of your apartment,*" I told him calmly and clearly, so there was no confusion about what was happening from my end, at which point he descended a step or two towards me, prompting me to the next

calibrated move, removing the weapon from my pants waist and aiming it at him. "*What are you gonna do with that?*" scoffed the fool, taking another step towards me. Death wish, his smirk, or he may not have even known what the hell it was, or understood exactly what was happening, though it should have been clear enough: I was holding something in my right hand and pointing it at him, something black and menacing, shaped like a gun, and although it might not have been immediately recognizable, the way it was modified, it still musta' registered as a weapon and said, clearly, and in plain English, exactly what I wanted. At this point, I may have repeated myself one more time, but to no further avail. He continued down the steps towards me, cocky, like I was mud, the squirt he knocked off balance on the check-out line, at which point I carefully aimed, but from the hip and squeezed out a shot, putting a single bullet inches from his flank, as close as I could without hitting him, a final warning, still, I came up there totally loaded for a one-sided battle, one in the chamber, seven in the clip. As they say, "G-d made man, but Smith and Wesson made them equal,"

KaBLAM!!!

Wow. Talk about impact. The next thing was a loud shriek, hers. She knew what she was setting up, knew that I wouldn't take it and when she heard the explosion understood immediately what went down and her part in it – so came running out of the apartment, down the stairs and into my arms, crying out she was sorry, while he paled, scrambling up the stairs backwards in full blown retreat trying to get away from me, which was when and why I really lost it, and stalked him a few steps while attempting to chamber a second round, this time to let it fly randomly towards his frantic, back peddling legs and let it hit wherever it went, Russian Roulette style, deliberately careless. Now, this was a rush, a huge release. Death to the dictator! Hang the rich! Eat their children! Luckily though, saints be praised, as it turned out, it jammed, so instead, as she was still sobbing and hugging me and he was by then gone, handed her the gun, saying: "See? I wasn't going to hurt anyone." Yeah, right, she didn't buy it either, so took the gun, brought it up to the roof, and threw away the loaded magazine just to make sure. That fortunate decision of hers cost the state its *attempted murder* charge. They believed, my attorney later told me, that I was just "grandstanding" by firing the single shot. Since they never found or even

looked for the magazine, they assumed I brought and fired only a single shot. Okay. Good, so the charges were *reckless endangerment* and *weapon possession*, lower-class felonies and easier to plea bargain down and away from state prison time. The case, according to my lawyer, was even “quite triable,” as I made no statement and the only witness was the Douchebag target himself, whose credibility could have been reasonably nullified. He was an obvious jerk who just might be lying to cover his own culpability. Maybe I chickened out, maybe he disarmed me and fired the shot, *reasonable doubt*. But, thank Zeus, it jammed. Had it not, well, who knows? Ask my father.

Just as Buttercup left to destroy the evidence, Douchebag’s roommate, the long-haired and bearded, red-headed, half-retarded stepchild much closer to my size, confronted me on the landing, angrily challenging me to fisticuffs, an offer I readily accepted. The combination of booze, hubris and adrenaline rushing through me helped me put him on the ground in short order, body-slamming him by the shoulders and neck, pinning him to the floor by the hair with my left before proceeding to pound his face with my right before letting him up only to scurry away, which was within mere minutes, maybe five after the gunshot blast, when the men in blue arrived who somehow knew it was me because at least one of them aimed his service revolver at me from the floor below. That was quite a sight, the faceless men in blue, the badges and the gun when the same voice told me: *freeze, not a word, not a movement, not a sound—don’t even blink—mission accomplished—don’t get shot—don’t give them a chance to make a mistake—it’s all over now, baby-blue*. And so, for then it was.

For once, maybe one of the best choices I ever made was to keep my mouth shut. Drunk and crazed, sobered up quickly enough to see that this was big trouble and that talking, saying anything at all would only make matters worse. Then, in my silence, I heard the comment about the line and knew the cop was right. For their part, they never even questioned me. They didn’t ask and I didn’t tell. By the time they got there it was mostly over anyway, and, as I said, the only witnesses were the big arrogant fool and me, two fools, and maybe a third, the Buttercup, instigating but not witnessing, engineering a sweet revenge on her lover, whom she was now

about to lose forever. Booze, broads, egos, and guns: that’s the way it often goes, and often, as we know even worse. Much worse.

But that comment about the line, he was so right, it had me thinking. Where did it start, and how can I get off or redirect it? Is it even possible? Were the gods flexible, perhaps amenable to change? This was supposed to be the beginning of a new life for me. A new apartment and my own business, just begun it a few months before and saw right away that it was going to be a success, i.e., money, at least enough to support myself without any handouts, and it was going to be fun, movement, just what I crave, trucking. Arkay Trucking delivers – serving the eastern seaboard, I boasted on my business cards, but now it seemed over just as it started, aborted by a bullet. Booze. The devil. The evil. The drink. That’s what I blamed it on, but really, it went much deeper than that. I wasn’t drunk when I bought the gun. I was Meyer Lansky on his way up. And I couldn’t stop that either, the sauce, drinking to oblivion almost nightly, never even counted the number of drinks. Who could, after the first five or six? If I counted anything at all, it was the number of hours spent boozing, say, from five or six, or maybe even seven in the evening at the latest, until whenever it was that I passed out, midnight, one, two, three... Now it looked like it would be stopped for me and at that prospect gained a measure of relief.

A Long Trail of Tears

Just a few months earlier I caught that DWI, robbed by a band of local brigands on Thursday and beat up by the Long Beach cops on Saturday, so the signs of the approaching abyss were clear. The lead up was that one sunny, summer afternoon, just a day or two before, when a hard-earned gold chain with a small collection of cool, golden charms: a ball and chain, a pistol, an anchor, and maybe one or two others, were snatched from my neck while strolling naively through the working-class, dark neighborhood to visit the Buttercup at her toy factory job. I see the dude coming towards me, a long, lanky, fit looking young black cat carrying two bags of groceries, one in each arm. As he gets close, only two or three feet away, without so much

as a pause he shifts one of the bags to the other arm, now carrying them both with one, uses his free hand in a lightning quick downward stroke to snatch it from my neck, barely even grazing the skin, and just as quickly takes off with it in the same direction he'd been headed in, the whole move made in a single, fluid motion, quite a feat, as surprising as it was deft and quick. Now I was proud of that chain, and worth repeating, I worked hard for every ounce of it, so, immediately spun around shouting out "*hell no, motherfucker!*" and took off after him. The brigand didn't expect that either, so startled, just a few short feet away, maybe three or four, lost his footing and tripped face down onto the sidewalk causing the grocery bags and their contents to splatter all over the pavement. I was now maybe one or two split seconds from landing feet first on the back of his neck, aiming to put my heels into the crease between his skull and spine, determined to get my chain back when *CRACK!* Another surprise, this one from the two by four, carried and swung by another happy-go-lucky predator, backed up by a few of his jackal pals, hitting me right square in the mug. Never saw them coming, so focused on closing in on my target. My eyes were shut by the blow and teared up blurry, but a quick moment later saw the thief with my chain regrouped and now back on the run, leaving me surrounded. Four or five of the gang were watching closely, silently, waiting for my next move, so figuring this round and the chain were lost, put my hands up saying "*Okay, you got it,*" hoping they wouldn't strike again, and they didn't. Instead, they let me walk out of that neighborhood, the whole drama having occurred just across the train tracks from the precinct house, in plain sight, in broad daylight, which was exactly where I headed. No, this wasn't ratting. You 'rat' on your confederates when you get caught and there's supposed to be a bond underwritten by silence. People get that confused. The brigands were not my confederates, there was no bond to break. Right away, the cops took me in a patrol car and drove right to the scene, now vacated, but across the street from the action were a few more locals who obviously either heard about or actually witnessed what happened, and now seeing me and the cops, began pointing to and laughing at us. It was great entertainment for them while I was minus a hard-earned gold chain and still somewhat stung by the crack to the face. The cops and me, we looked like chumps to them, and that was exactly how it felt. Robbed and assaulted like that, multiple felonies in the bright light of a warm summer day in full view of

the police station maybe only 75 yards away, and at the crime scene within minutes, impotent, all of us. Stung again. So, still seething with frustrated rage, a couple nights later while cruising around nearby in my van, again with Leanne and a few of her lady pals, crossed paths with one of Long Beach's finest driving towards me on a dark and quiet, two-way residential street. Somehow we made eye contact, that's when I gave him the middle finger salute as a gesture of my deep respect, appreciation, and gratitude. Certainly a genuinely heartfelt and expressive one, but not a very subtle or terribly smart one, more like another of my drunken, angry, and acutely self-defeating M.O.s, i.e., always *willing to pay a price just to strike a blow* states of mind. That, of course, led to being pulled over, dragged out of the van and handcuffed, which led to my further vocalizing a growing dissatisfaction by erupting viciously with every vulgar thought and phrase I could conjure regarding the sexual activities of his female relatives, which led to some understandable perturbation on the part of the police officer. Said annoyance expressed itself though perhaps in a somewhat less understandable manner. After a quick ride in the squad car, upon arriving outside the station house, as he opened the rear door of the patrol car for me to exit, handcuffed behind my back, as I turned shifting towards the street, lifting then positioning my legs to steady myself on the pavement, head and shoulders bent down from the waste, facing the ground, about to lunge my upper body forward for the necessary leverage to hoist myself up and out, just as I got into position another unforeseen *kaPOW!* Kicked smack damn hard in the face, right in front of the lit up entrance to the precinct, field goal style. He didn't care who saw, or who even mighta' seen. Fuck ME. Right in front of the same goddamn precinct house I went marching to after the great chain robbery, and now prone on a hard bench in a basement cell where I'd spend the night after being booked. Bang! Right in the kisser. Fuck HIM! Not a good week. Booze. Booze, broads, brawls, rage, and a death wish. After coming to a few hours later, hung-over, beat-up, and in need of modest cash bail money, Buttercup came through with the money and they released the now somewhat sobered up drunk, a bad start to a miserable day. How she got it? Who knows? But she did. Charged with a DWI and resisting arrest, gifts courtesy John Barleycorn, a full plate of misery and a side order of crazy, one night of many, another morning like too many. One beat down of quite a few with a

hangover bonus as an all-day reminder. Booze. The line. It was nearly at its end. But where, why and how did it begin?

Way back in Brooklyn, Ocean Parkway and X

History, especially a personal one, begins at any point on a line the storyteller wants it to, so here's mine. Once upon a summer morning time, at about four or five years old, after elevating down to the apartment building lobby with dear old dad for a Sunday stroll, he first stopped at the mailbox to extract whatever mail came in since last check, and sure enough, there was a letter from camp, or nursery school, whatever it may have been. A "letter from..." about me was never a good thing – even then, "a letter to your parents" was a serious threat, no exceptions. According to reports, it seemed that earlier that week, as the young Bobby was dressing or undressing in front of his assigned cubby, he spotted a kid in front of the adjacent cubby. For some unfathomable reason, then decided to push the kid's head into the dull metal hook used to hang the clothes inside the cubby. Not too hard, but hard enough to cause shock, tears, and fright. I remember doing it, and I remember not knowing why. I just did it, and that's what the letter stated. Dad was not pleased; it was another dose of shame for him to swallow; his son was out of control, disturbed. As he finished reading, he looked down at me and asked: "*Are you ever going to behave? Just tell me the truth. I won't be mad,*" and so after giving it some honest thought, a brief moment or two, the silent inner voice stated this is me, unlikely to ever be any different. So, I looked back up at him and, without sarcasm or malice, with the utmost candor and sincerity, answered "*no.*" Well, Dad sure didn't appreciate the candor and, despite his promise, slapped me hard in the face, causing my own tears, shock, and fear. But that was the truth, just what he asked for, so let's just say that's where the line started when dad made his penetrating prediction of just where and how it was going to lead and end: [working at] a shoe store (a nobody), [sleeping on] a park bench or death row (the electric chair). Thanks, pop.

Stayin' Alive

"Life goin' nowhere, somebody help me, yeah, I'm stayin' alive" – The Bee Gees (1977)

So how did this budding, entrepreneur with a harem full of ladies and endless prospects for more come to be willing to throw it all away by firing the fateful shot heard 'round the village at the big, dumb, apartment building bastard? Glad you asked, so here comes a bit more history beginning at a later point on the line. Back in '78, just after returning in shame from my disappointing but adventurous cross-country excursion, now residing in a depressing, thrift-shop-style rented room in a furnished, Freeport, flop-house for the tidy sum of twenty-five dollars a week, which could barely be maintained, shoplifting steaks, multi-vitamins, beer, and chocolate bars, treading turbulent water just to stay alive, forced to hustle some way of earning, or stealing, or begging, for enough dough each day to simply keep from drowning. At just nineteen, with only homelessness, stints in the jail-house then the Navy, and a court-mandated year in a "therapeutic community" behind me for experience, keeping the belly fed and a roof over my head was the full-time occupation that pushed me to peak instinctive creativity every day, even willing to work, which often turned out to be the surest, if not fastest, method. What was lacking in experience was made up for in drive. There was no better choice; hunger and fear of homelessness, like back out in LA, which sucked, kept me in overdrive, having nothing else to fall back on, no home, no family, so was determined to avoid a repetition of that unpleasantness by any means available, having solemnly vowed to myself, again, the voice, that fiasco was a once around and done with forever event. Homeless was horrible. Horrible. My standard method to keep that sacred vow was to open a local newspaper and turn to the classified sections, *Help Wanted* and *Room For Rent*, where I hoped to and usually did find a way, at least temporarily, albeit with many a bump in the road, mostly due to naiveté or otherwise self-caused, to stave off the "park bench" at least another day, maybe a week, or perhaps even a month at a time. Just about anything would be better than sleeping outdoors on sooty rooftops using sneakers as a pillow again.

Where were my parents? One might ask, well, aside from being long divorced and not at all on speaking terms, they never seemed to have the foundational instincts parents usually come with as standard equipment, protecting their offspring, demanding to know where their child was or how, what or even if he was eating. But that's an old story. These are the same folks that had my two-hundred dollar bail remanded at sixteen, leaving me in the clutches of the murderous misanthropes in the county jail for thirty long and dangerous days, having cigarettes put out on my arms and damn near beaten into a coma, so my very existence, let alone welfare, was not exactly a top-level concern of theirs. They gave up on me long ago and dined out or ordered in while I shoplifted not to starve. No problem. I mean, hey, after all, the kid was a "bad seed" and everybody knew that. Right? Teachers, neighbors, cousins, everyone, that's what they told me, everyone, so they felt justified, I guess, or maybe it was just plain selfishness on top of not really caring in the first place, a comforting excuse, or maybe they were just out of their depths right from the start. Some people just ain't cut out to be parents, biology notwithstanding, but bowing to convention, they do it anyway only to find out later, too much later, that it's not for them. At this point though, it hardly mattered, it was academic, I still had to survive. That wasn't academic.

Early in my flop-house stay, probably the first week, I put out an SOS call to the distant, Brooklyn-born optometrist, whose office was only a few short towns away in low-key Massapequa, asking to loan me the twenty-five bucks I needed for that second-week's rent. He told me to come by the office and pick it up. When I got there dad was not around, instead was met by his secretary who handed me an envelope containing the cash and a hand written note on his official practice stationery stating it would be the first and last, nothing else by way of any support would be "forthcoming" [so don't bother asking again]. Thanks, Daddy-o, and here's to you too, selfish prick. That's for everything. I never did ask again, and it would be well over a decade before I'd ever even see or speak to him again, and even then, it was very brief, minutes, a cup of coffee and over, one and done, initiated by me, a memorable reunion. And that time I asked for nothing, that time the bad-seed came to forgive.

Artist Wanted

"Artist wanted," read the ad. It was an after-school program, something the local school district hires outside contractors for, learning activities using the arts; they needed someone to sketch pictures, and that I could reasonably do, a talent inherited from pops. Thanks. Cartoon puppets, easy enough. It was a part-time gig offer, perfect; plenty of time left for theft and drunkenness, so cleaned myself up and went right at it. It also offered the benefit of being situated mere blocks from my flop-house dive, so getting there and back presented little effort and no traveling costs. I could walk there and, for the time I was employed by them, the Creative Resource Center, that's what I did. The outfit was mostly run by women, young adult ladies, and looking back at it I realize now, besides being moderately talented with a pencil and sketch pad, they must have thought I was fun to have around. At nineteen, outgoing and friendly I probably was, but little did they realize how ugly, empty and unloved the young artist felt on the inside. Whatever, we all wear masks in public, and it worked for me. One of them, a teacher, a young black woman, late-twenties I guess, with one of those ridiculously long and hyphenated last names that sounded like some kinda' British royalty, like it was a title and way too pretentious to go through, so I just called her Barbara, her first name, or BJ, short for Barbara-Jean Pierce Atwood, etc., etc. Barbara thought I was real cute, almost irresistible, and let me know that by frequently mentioning that her refrigerator was filled with Heinekens and that one of these days she was going to have me over for a visit. All she was waiting for was a green light signal from me. Truth be told, she was quite hot, lovely, tits and ass coming and going all over the place, topped by a pretty face and a totally captivating broad smile. You could see the delight in her eyes when she looked at me, but I was hesitant, never having been with a black lady before, just plain intimidated, to my eternal regret, but still remember some of the things she playfully joked about with me and to the other ladies about me in deliberate earshot. I won't repeat them but they're etched into my memory as a source of frustration for never having the gonads to realize them with her or downing some of the cold Heinekens she kept waiting for me. It was before its time, put it that way. That's all. One missed opportunity of many, *c'est la vie*, like they say in

Brooklyn. Yeah, that's how it sometimes goes. Other times? You get the chance to make up for some of them. It goes that way too.

One of the lesser opportunities I did not miss out on though, also much to my regret and shame (there's a lotta' both in this tale), was supplementing my earned income from the CRC by sneaking in after hours and helping myself to some of their hardware, tape recorders specifically, brand new ones they kept handy in a unlocked closet, and selling them to a local, hefty, well-dressed (Super Fly style) preacher man, an older black guy known to me simply as *the Reverend*. How we met or created this relationship I have no recollection, but he must have known I wasn't manufacturing these things or authorized to give out samples. He probably also saw that I was desperate for rent and food money, so closed his eyes and opened his wallet, paying me in cash, a week's rent each for the two or three I brought him, all still in their retail packaging. Amazing the compromises we (me) make and risks we (I) take when a little hunger, fear, self-pity, and loneliness, i.e., desperation, drives us. Yeah, Barbara's appreciative attention notwithstanding, I was quite alone and felt every pang of every minute of it. The flop-house offered no companionship, none whatsoever, not even the landlord lived there, a house full of strangers behind closed doors, as hollow as my insides, a perfect reflection. I don't recall ever having met any of the other three or four tenants in the two-story shit-shack either. I knew they were there though, you could hear movement behind the thin walls, occasional voices, crying, yelling, moans, never laughter or any other sound of joy, probably all white, welfare drunks. The closest contact I ever had with any of them was finding a note left in the community refrigerator reading "*keep your paws off my food - Kitty*" after having helped myself to a slice of cheesecake or something. Lovely. Home sweet home. At least I had a bed, a roof and a door, if not a kitchen, burning the steaks on a hot plate stolen from my mother's house, eating them with my hands, silverware was for pussies, and as far as the beer and chocolate bars I helped myself to? Well, they're pretty easy to get down the gullet. All that was needed was a little salt and a bottle-opener, so despite the odds, the orphaned cast-out continued to survive.

At some point, after settling in to the routine end of a dull-gray winter, I reached out to a couple of good-time Charlie buddies, among them my ol' pal lanky Horsehead, who, aside from the laughs, was his usual useless self, so there wasn't much value in that move. He came over to the flop-house for a visit one night with another sometimes pal from the Rock, a tough kid with a girl's name, Jamie who loved motors and fenders and rubber, on their way to the stock car races at the edge of town, which I had zero interest in, so it was a one-and-done affair, but another guy in particular worth recalling, another rough and tumble Jewish kid my age that liked to party, steal, fight, and fuck like I did, maybe even more, was a chap named David Klugman. Back in junior high when I first met him, he was a bit on the baby-fat chunky side although otherwise a pretty good-looking, blue-eyed kid who resembled a handsome, young, lighter-complexioned Sylvester Stallone, a kid we called the *baby Kaluga-whale*, or just Kaluga. At also just eighteen or nineteen, Kaluga already had a pretty decent apartment of his own, paid for by his father, right on the beach in, you guessed it, Long Beach, the blue-collar west end section, where he invited me to stay temporarily, rent-free. His dad was footing the bill anyway, so who cared? No one, not the landlord, not the neighbors, not even his dad, so it was a great, if short-term deal relieving me of the burden of rent and the stubborn loneliness that plagued me while plotting my next move, always in basic survival mode, "one step away from the shoeshine – two steps away from the county line" type of thing, thanks again Paul Simon. By now it was mid-spring, and the weather warmed up, and with it, my thirst for outdoor action. After those dreary two or three months in the flop-house, *vamoosed* the sketching gig, and Barbara, the sexy, black, British noble, to make my way to greener, or at least sandier pastures. Kaluga showed me, then gave me a colored Polaroid of his blond-haired and bare-breasted teenage girlfriend cracking a big smile for the camera, "*look at them tits! Nipples straight to heaven!*" (as if they needed pointing out, pardon again the pun) which by themselves were more than enough to get me to move in with him, partially in hopes of meeting and seeing those award-winning boobs in the flesh, so to speak, or possibly being setup with one of her similarly gifted friends, maybe even snuggling in on her. Well? Neither of those possibilities ever occurred, but a lot more did.

Thrills and risks

She may not even have really been his actual girlfriend, we never met, she was “away” somewhere, but those boobs and that smile were real enough and for a photo’s sake, held the power to draw and keep any man’s attention indefinitely. It was the kind of picture you kept in your wallet just to show off and claim she was yours. But, aside that memorable image, it wasn’t about her. It’s about Dave, his kindness, generosity, and fraternal warmth towards a brother down on his luck when it counted, shootin’ my regular. Aside from an earlier time when he took me in for a short spell, maybe a week or two or three, when he just happened to be waiting outside my parents’ house in his running car for a night out, while I was inside tearing the place apart, literally, throwing keys through the sheet rock wall and kicking over furniture in a not-so-subtle fit of rage over an ultimatum made by dear old ma’ (stay in college or move out), so into his car I headed where he told me “it’s alright, you can move in with me, Jewboy.” It was the last of my home with family days, forever. It had been a while, several long months since I’d last seen him up close, the whole cross-country journey back and forth sojourn later. Now, it was clear that time had not been altogether kind to him. Kaluga seemed pretty normal back in school, even a bit tame by comparison with me and my other friends and associates, not droog material, but today, though he’d trimmed down and filled out a bit, baby-fat for muscle, appeared to be slowly but steadily going schizo, morphing into a rumbling, ruffian, ne’er-do-well, sparring with me using only his left arm. At just about my size and a lefty, he wasn’t bad, in a real brawl he’d need both, but for sparring, believe it or not, Kabbo had his hands full with him, both of them. In another atypical detail of the nice Jewish boy complex was a small, hand drawn, poorly executed tattoo on his upper left arm where the bicep meets the tricep of a hockey stick and puck above words reading “*I love hockey.*” It looked rushed and childlike, inexplicably unprofessional. Though he did play, and it was the popular sport among the hyper-masculine locals, the tattoo by itself seemed a bit nutso, a bad sign; a free-hand drawn tattoo? Like his body meant that little? But along with those other listed qualities, especially his willingness to take risks kept us active friends despite his subtle but steady fading from tangible reality; making occasional references to people who weren’t there and dropping sentences

midway between thoughts. I either didn’t see it, didn’t recognize it, or somehow denied the extent of it. He musta’ been playing, I thought. It was a common goof in our crowd, acting crazy like that for laughs, but reality was that Dave was hurting, badly, and headed south, deep south.

There was the time I took a small handful of his anti-psychotic pills just to see if they’d get me high, but all that happened was my falling asleep for nearly two days, buried alive in his living room sofa. No high, but plenty of deep rest, no dreams either, almost comatose and never repeated. How they could ever help anybody unless the diagnosis was chronic insomnia is tough to imagine, but I wasn’t a pharmacologist, despite the regular use of my handy (stolen) PDR to check the pills (also stolen) before swallowing them. Dalmane? Phenobarbital? Quaalude? How much might kill me? Okay, take one or two less, due diligence.

Instead of looking for or working any kinda’ real job for actual pay, a salary, together we formed an unstoppable shoplifting team, boosting frozen groceries and beer by the case, he, the always reliable wheel-man, waiting outside the supermarkets, motor running, me, the action-figure, brazenly carrying out a case at a time, as casually as if I were a waiter serving a tray of treats to poolside guests at a fancy seaside beach club. A case of warm Budweiser? Why certainly, madam. Straightaway. That was the key, brazenness; so brazen no one would suspect it wasn’t paid for. Body language projecting an air of relaxed confidence, supporting a tactical logistical efficiency, speed, a practiced nonchalance being the keys to better living via larcenous success. You heard it here. I was excellent at it. Nobody suspects a young, relatively clean-cut, middle-class-looking white dude like me of sinking that low in the first place, so I took advantage of that to reach the heights—or depths of petty advantage. Just walk in, regularly rotating supermarkets, never allowing myself to become recognized or in any way familiar, always an anonymous stranger, head to the stack of cases, pick one up, like I worked there moving stock, and walk out into the running car just out front, calm, cool and collected. We never got snagged thus enjoyed free beer as a reward for taking the risk of our dastardly deeds. The supermarket chains survived, they even have a name for it, shrinkage, so in a perverse sense it was business as usual. Frozen TV dinner bounties were

also on the shrinkage menu, Birds Eye *Hawaiian Bar-B-Q*, our meal of choice, pineapple and glazed ham, more like candy than food, which altogether had us sitting pretty with regards shelter, eats and drinks. We made for an effective team, if not the Bugs and Meyer gang, then at least the Bowery Boys, 1920s angels with dirty faces cum 1970s Long Island. And it was fun, the something for nothing game, gambling on a risk for reward, as we say, a real rush. It was months, if not years before I ever got caught; steady success became an obsession.

Let me backup a bit before returning to my time with the baby whale. Since bottom level survival was still the overriding focus of concern, food, shelter, and clothing stuff, I looked for a solution that would solve at least two out of three in a single move, like back in the navy, only not out to sea again, that seemed out, or anything committed to for years. It may have been back in Freeport—the flop-house, a couple of cold months before moving to the beach where the idea to look for a job at an upstate summer camp took root, the kind I used to go to as a kid before being banished and excommunicated from the last one, Fuck's Cock (see *Kabbo*: Volume I). I could still pass as relatively normal, if only long enough for a job interview, and get hired, so that was the plan, sticking with what was familiar and within reach. Again, the classified section, this time the New York Times instead of a local Pennysaver, posts looking for camp counselors at upstate sleep-away camps. After making a couple of phone calls, I quickly got an invitation to an interview in Brooklyn of all the familiar places, where the owners lived, but now had the dilemma of not having any respectable clothes to wear for a respectable job interview. At desperation's door, the cast-out orphan solved that little problem with the standard M.O., theft, this time targeting my dear old mom's credit card. Somehow, she must have agreed to allow me a brief visit home, long enough, like a half hour, maybe under some pretext I invented, long enough to make the snatch and then bring the card to a department store and use it to buy a collared shirt and business trousers, nothing too extravagant, only what was absolutely necessary, maybe even a spring jacket, before either discarding the card or returning it. Who remembers? Who even cares? I was used to scraping the bottom, so this unremarkable event doesn't carry with it – nor does the interview – too many details, but from that perspective it's no wonder that to

my mom I was basically *persona non grata*. She wasn't at all worried about my being, fed, clothed, or housed anyway, so? That's that.

Having presented them at the interview (which I took public transportation to, a major *schlep* itself from Long Island that had to be concealed, lest its discovery beg the questions *why doesn't he have a car* and *why isn't he in school?*) with tightly edited highlights of my childhood camping experiences and successfully hiding my current state of affairs, I was hired on the spot. That's worth remembering, and within a few weeks, just over a month, I'd be out of Dave's and hopefully enjoying a long, hot summer in the cool of the Catskill Mountain woods, a landlubber, where I'd be immediately housed and fed and, by the end have enough of a salary coming to me to get myself another furnished room and a few more frozen TV dinners, and just maybe another shirt or two until figuring out the next move. I might even feel optimistic enough to actually pay for some of my beer. Doubtful. Shoplifting was still too much of a rush, and the addiction, like gambling, had taken firm hold, a touch of *kleptomania*, as they called it. Aside from all that, though, anything seemed possible once the husband and wife team of Brooklyn bred, middle-aged, and middle-classed, Canarsieite camp owners pushed the papers forward across the dining room table towards me and handing me a pen said, "*Okay. Here's the contact. Sign it.*"

With an end date in sight, we continued our shoplifting spree and the Birds Eye or Swansons' TV dinner feasts unfettered by the usual deterrents such as guilt, fear, or (perish the thought), honesty. Instead, we enjoyed the rush and rewards of the regular challenge. One rush in particular, one I'd just as soon not have endured, was brought on when Dave had a vicious fistfight with one of his older, beefier, and possibly meaner neighbors, a local, German-Irish, lower-end, union construction laborer dude that lived in the same building. We were from a few towns away, and this was his turf, not ours, regardless, they were natural enemies, it's a DNA thing, some people you just don't like on sight nor they you and that's what this was. No specific conflict, it was solely visceral. Not sure what exactly led up to this stage of the ongoing tension, but one afternoon it finally boiled over and found them brawling on the pavement outside the apartment building, where the local dude was slightly getting the better of Dave, who fought fiercely as they

wrestled, gouged, punched, and jabbed at one another in heated battle on the merciless concrete. He had his seconds, and I was seconding Dave, barely resisting the temptation to jump in and pummel the guy's head. He had long hair too, which is always a disadvantage in a knockdown, drag-out fistfight. I could have easily grabbed a handful and used it to pull his head back from Dave, giving Kaluga the momentary advantage and the chance to let loose, hard, with both hockey-lovin' fists aimed at his smug, gentile mug. But I didn't. The neighbor's seconds and I – our job was either to jump in against each other, there were two or three of them to one, me, or make sure it stayed *one-on-one*, which it did, with Dave coming out the slight but decided loser, sort of. For me, eyeball to eyeball with his pals was a tense standoff, and the neighbor guy had a tougher time than he expected, surprising him, as he too was injured by scrapes and a little blood from the frenzied sidewalk scuffle, but to this day, I feel a slight sense of regret for not jumping in. Anyway, I made up for my reticence with many scuffles to come in Long Beach, but sadly, none on behalf of forever-young Dave.

Soon, the time was approaching for me to move on and somehow make my way upstate to Woodbourne, New York. The trip from Long Beach was maybe one hundred or so miles away to my new country home, Camp Impala, my prospective summer retreat and temporary salvation, a life raft. Again, and this is worth repeating, it was actually the second time Dave took me in. The first being after leaving my mom's house in Rockville Fucking Center for the final time, just months after being released from Topic House, that final *shit-fit*, busting up furniture and knocking down lamps and paintings, etc., once again in reaction to her predictable, painful, and enraging rejection, her highly qualified acceptance, the coldness and blame, adding insult to injury again and again. It was bad enough to be beaten and degraded repeatedly by my ol' man, a small boy, sometimes publicly, on the streets in front of neighbors, schoolmates, and family friends, while she made a fuss but mostly stood by and let it happen year after year, but it was even worse to be blamed for it, as if ice needles were poked into my tender eyes. Kaluga brought his fellow *Jewboy* pal to live with him for a few weeks, right then and there, before I headed out to California for my long anticipated *West is the best—get here—we'll do the rest* adventure. That's a friend in deed, as they say, and this was the

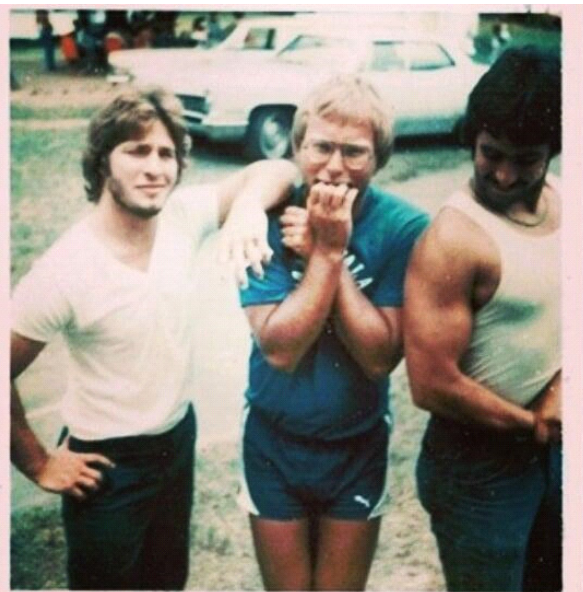
second time he came to the aid of a friend in need, and indeed, I've not forgotten it, nor will I ever let it be. Now, for whatever it may be worth, it's on record in print.

So one early summer morning, after all the shoplifting, sparring, OD'ing, and beering, Kaluga gassed up his trusty Oldsmobile Cutlass and drove me and my trusty sea-bag full of clothes, my only worldly possessions, the nearly hour and a half from Long Beach, New York, over the George Washington Bridge to Route 17 North, New Jersey, where we said our goodbyes as he dropped me off on the highway shoulder, from where I'd hitchhike the rest of the way to the camp and hopefully arrive alive and on time. Again, it was quite generous of him to make that trip, as I probably didn't even pitch in for gas or tolls, being nearly always broke those days, and whatever I may have had needed to be held onto at least until I got some more, which then looked like not before the anticipated end of summer paycheck. As it turned out, the *goodbyes*, *seeeya' Jewboys*, laughter, and handshakes on the highway shoulder were the last we'd ever share.

Camp Impala, 1978

"Pack up and get out. Go home or get lost. We don't care. Here's a check. Just go. *Now!*" Who could blame her, the severe, older Barbie-doll looking camp owner? This was the second time she moved to expel me. The first time she rescinded her edict was after my promise not to drink anymore or even leave the grounds. This time, though? It was clear we were out of rope. Both of us. She was right. I was done. It's not clear exactly what led up to it this particular and final time, but it probably had something to do with the relentless, tortuous cluster headaches plaguing me wherever I went (Kabbo: Volume I), this time to the wooden camp bunks of the Catskills. The time before, maybe after only the second week of what was supposed to be eight, was a frightening disaster and dangerously close to catastrophic. Here's how that memorable episode went:

First, a bit of background. The staff was mixed, half American, mostly but not exclusively, young adult Jewish-Americans, college kids, and the other half European, mostly, but not exclusively Scandinavians, with a few Germans, mostly white, and maybe a few black-Americans thrown into the mix, though none come to mind. The foreigners were there on some type of exchange program, and generally speaking, they were a group of bright, fun, athletic, adventurous, and responsible young adults whose English and diction were better than most Americans', whereas I was only a few of those



things, I'm sure you can guess which of them I wasn't. One of the group, Swiss Tom, the son of an MD and a former Special Forces soldier (when was the last time the Swiss were ever at war? Not, I think, since William Tell (whoever he was, aside the arrow through the apple on his son's head guy) used to bust my chops, like when he saw me changing

into a bathing suit, would point to me and ask, "*Rob, zis body can schvim?*" It was frat-house play, not vicious, so I laughed along with him. Sports per se never grabbed me. Chasing balls or even hitting them with bats barely thrilled me. Actually, if anything, they bored me, so never put any effort into getting any good at them, but yes, Tom, I could *schvim*, pretty well in fact—and play pool, shoot straight, and fight a bit, and, of course, I could drink and take drugs, all of which were plenty for me in the physical realm; and the ladies? I could do lovin', which brings me to Susan, from Brooklyn, my soft-spoken, large-breasted, sweet-smiled summer love. I'd have to say my final goodbyes to her. Couples usually pair up pretty quickly in these smaller communities, and it happens almost right away, usually by the end of the

first week. As was explained to me later in life by another camp director during a more successful term, when there are fewer options, choices are easier to make. So it is with a camp. There were maybe only three or four eligible lady counselors of the right age and look, so rather than waste limited time by trying for all of them at once, standard practice and usually a losing one, I settled on one of them, the cutest of those most accessible. Maybe not my number one choice, but really, how often does that happen? Another saying that stuck and I like to repeat is: "*I don't get the girls I want, I get the girls that want me.*"

Thus, Sue and I selected each other during that first week, spending more than a single night together fit snugly in a one-person sleeping bag in the woods, where the chorus of crickets and hooting owls blended with gasps of sudden delight and furtive laughter. Beyond that? I don't recall anything more about her, not even a single conversation. It's possible we never actually had one, none being necessary to suit our ends, the base-line obvious ones. But those nights? Although sleeping outdoors in the woods, not even in a tent, in the shadows of pitch black tree tops, the sky above illuminated by brilliant constellations of ancient starlight was unlike any other beauty I ever experienced, mesmerizing to the point of overwhelming, it could at the same time be somewhat unsettling, especially for city folk. It was a different kind of rush—a combination of fear, excitement, awe of nature, and lust—better than boosting cases of beer, with seen and unseen forest creatures prowling around and heard rustling nearby in the dark. That's for sure as well. *What if we got caught by the camp director?* We were supposed to be in the bunks with the kids, or *what if the raccoons got a little too brave and frisky, and those head-bobbing, red-eyed demons started chewing on our toes in our sleep?* Bears? Wolves? Snakes? Who knows? A menagerie of menace was close at hand, we were intruders, that much was certain; better hug her tight and smother myself in her breasts before the critters, human or otherwise, evil forest spirits, wicked woods warlocks, or legendary ax murderers like *the Cropsey maniac* caused us to flee. Though the chemistry, pheromone-wise, wasn't exactly all that it could have been and had been with others, her pretty eyes, bountiful boobs, and those shared nights cloaked in the darkness of the wild I happily *do* recall.

But this story isn't about *happy*, it's about *failure*: failure to see it through, failure to act the part of a responsible team player, failure to succeed at even an easy and fun job like summer camp counselor, where almost all my needs were instantly and freely met as part of the package: food, shelter, and companionship. Rather, true to form, at only nineteen, I managed to find a way to shoot myself in the foot, i.e., my regular.



A close encounter with catastrophe

Sometime after the second week, a handful of the Europeans—maybe six or seven of them—appointed me as chaperone on a night off campus to booze it up in the local hick town, a quiet hamlet called Woodbourne, where a nearby state prison accounted for most of its economic vitality. Quaint. A town full of prison guards and government clerks. Nice. There were a couple of small gin-mills by the two-block central square, both my style, only big enough for about fifty partiers, dimly lit, sawdust and pinball joints decorated with framed newspaper articles and photos of local high school athletes and assorted town celebrities, the volunteer fire department chief, the mayor, and grinning guys proudly holding up the big fish they caught,

the prom queen-types, real Norman Rockwell material, life imitating art. As guide and director, I chose the one with the pool table so we could sink balls with cue sticks as we swilled tap beer from pitchers and made jokes about each other, the kids, and the camp—a bit of steam to let off after the novelty phase of the Impala community expired. The outing coincided with the same two week period since I'd had a drink, no booze at all, so with tolerance down, I was more susceptible to drunkenness than during the regular binging of my normal nightlife routine, and drunk I did get. Quickly. Very. '*Shitfaced*' I believe is the technical term. So much so that, aside from the stale sawdust on the barroom floor, the dartboard, juke box, tables littered with empty beer pitchers and full ashtrays, my only lasting visual memory of the evening is the lone female counselor among us, *Gertie*, or something, laying on her back on top of the pool table, legs slightly spread, half-asleep. The girl was a somewhat masculine blond with hairy legs and armpits which she seemed to like to show off, like it was supposed to be shocking, maybe symbolic of feminist liberation, or cute? No idea. Yeah, it was eye-catching but in an unflattering way, and she wasn't all that much to look at to start with, so the point was unclear, and she laughed a lot at inside jokes told in Dutch, meaning we never knew who or what she found so funny. If she happened to catch your eye while laughing, well, it wasn't so pleasant; maybe the joke was on you. A derisive term she used to describe men she found unappealing was "soft-boiled egg." Now *that* was funny. Anyway, apart from that image the night's a dark blank. On the other hand, a few of the ladies of the camp, including Sue's saucy smile (she hadn't joined us), another very pretty, playfully elegant, short-haired brunette, an Ivy League cheerleader type who called herself *Charlie* or something else catchy like that, and friendly flirted just enough to keep my attention, but extended no further invitation (bedding her down, though quite worthy, appeared to be a long-term and unlikely project, it would take more than clean new clothes and a highly modified résumé to fool her), and the mommy Barbie-doll camp director's final, icy stare, they remain permanently fixed in my head.

As stated, these were fun and mature folks, especially for their age (at least by most American standards), athletic, adventurous, and smart, all of them speaking at least two languages, their own and English, on par with ours,

maybe better, so it felt flattering that they even invited me along, let alone chose me to lead the nighttime expedition into rural America. Although, at closer look, compared to the straight-laced and obedient middle-class college kids that made up most of the rest of the staff, somehow, perhaps, my air of reckless confidence and rebelliousness made me seem the obvious choice. I knew how to have fun too, at least when I wasn't getting beat up for starting a bar fight I couldn't finish or trashing a home I felt unloved and stepped on in, and not just my own (Kabbo: Volume I). There was Hans the Hun, my humorless, pre-med and quietly obedient junior counselor ("Germans are either at your feet or at your throat," claimed Churchill), who I made do all the work with the kids; Tom, the good-natured wiseguy; and Wim, the tall, trim, laconic, long-haired and totally ripped Finnish lifeguard who seemed to eat nothing but watermelon three times a day (it looked like Gertie had her eye on him, nothing about the dude seemed "soft-boiled"); dark-haired, muscular Dave Schwartz, the Jewish-American college kid who liked to lift weights with the dishwasher between meals behind the chow hall. That cheerful young chap was a local hire, a pompadour-style guy with a light heavyweight build complimented by *de rigueur* death's head and snake tattoos, and a sarcastic grin that suggested he may have been on early *work release* from the friendly neighborhood big house. But he was decent and jovial enough, and the dishes were always laid out spotless clean, three times a day, seven days a week, so who cared? His past, whatever it may have been or not been was his business. Those guys, whose names and faces I recall, were invited, but I doubt any of them were on board that particular excursion. The others in our party? No recall whatsoever. More blank. Just the layout and the hairy chick on the pool table. Whatever, whoever, my feeling is that all present were having a pretty good time letting loose together off campus, practically having the place to ourselves at eleven p.m. on a sleepy summer weeknight. *Order another pitcher, rack'm, put a quarter in the jukebox. Donna Summer. Eightball corner pocket. Hey! Watch it with those darts!* But for me? The bar party was merely a warm-up. The main event, when a ton of ugly hit the fan, was yet to come.

The next morning, the pack's fallen leader awoke to an all-too-familiar horror scene. *What'd I do this time?* Right after reveille, they summoned me

to the office over the loudspeaker, where both owners and an aid laid it out, showed me the evidence, and ordered me off the property, which would have left me not only broke but also homeless, upstate, where I knew no one and had nothing. Not a thing, not even bus fare. Apparently, sometime after we returned from the cozy quiet of downtown Woodbourne, in an alcoholic fit of inexplicable rage during a blackout, I chased a few of the campers around the grounds swinging a baseball bat. The wreckage as evidence was undeniable: a driver's side car mirror ripped from its metal mounting bracket lying shattered on the ground several yards away from the damaged vehicle, a line-drive, and a battered wooden bunk door with a torn screen—something out of a Stephen King novel. Terrifying. The kids, a few of the older boys, had to run from and lock me out, which is probably when I started battering the bunk door. Thank Zeus and Athena I didn't *break on through to the other side* that time, as it likely would have been, well, you know, an irreparable catastrophe. Who knows? Fearing the homeless part, and determined to keep my vow to never go through that again after my LA nosedive into vagrancy, I pleaded for another chance, promising to never drink again or even leave the property. Out of practicality and perhaps even a touch of mercy, the season already in full swing, she relented, permitting me to stay at the camp with big-bosomed Sue from Brooklyn. That one-time reprieve lasted only another couple of weeks, just about to the halfway point, when tortured by another headache, which often kept me from doing anything beyond wandering around the campus moaning in agony, holding my hand to my temple, and swollen red eye shut, pure suffering, which eventually brought us to that second and final command, "*Get out.*" most likely, for refusing to get off my cot because I was hurting so badly from a morning attack, "clusters" that sometimes woke me out of otherwise deep sleep—not an easy start to the day. *Here, have a nice hot spike to drive through your skull with your coffee.* Not only were the headaches torturous to me, but to the owners, my very presence was a chronic headache. *Misery*, as they say, *loves company*, I didn't want to be alone again, though it was clear to most everyone, including me by then, that this counselor was a lot more misery than he was worth, and the run was finally out of rope, so there was no more mercy or company to be kept, no pleading or arguing either. She would have to pay me something for all that time, and with that, it was over. Done. Finished. Over and out. After



writing the check for about half the summer, a few hundred bucks, and packing my bag, I said my *goodbyes*, gave Sue a quick last passionless kiss, but out of the shame of failure and defeat, never even bothered to take her number, and left the grounds to join the freshly released former inmates on a Greyhound back to the bus terminal in Times Square. Another goddamn depressing ride, carrying the latest self-inflicted failure added to my growing, life-long collection, closing in on the ever-looming park bench. That's how it went.

A leap of no faith

By late afternoon, there I stood on Eighth and Forty-second, just outside Port Authority, schlepping another sea bag full of old clothes, with a few bucks in my pocket but no place to go, on the cusp of *homeless* once again. The scene was beginning to feel familiar, having arrived at the same location under very similar circumstances from my *west is the best* adventure only months before. This time though, naturally I thought of Dave right away so made the call. That's when another horror struck. It's not clear who picked up the phone, maybe his older sister, a real hockey jock, or exactly how the news reached me; the details are stitched together from fragments of memory, but the essence is fully intact. My good friend and fellow Hebe brother had a lot more rage and agony under the hood than I could see or ever even imagine. Catastrophe. Tragedy. Shortly after he left me on Route 17N, a matter of a few days or a couple weeks later, he took a baseball bat to his father and beat him into a comma, or nearly so, right before taking the train to the city and arriving at the observation deck of the

Empire State Building, where he stripped off all his clothes, scaled the barrier and made the leap. Kaluga was gone. *Morta*. Not even a corpse. Whatever it was, he couldn't bear it. The darkness behind the smiles grew until it swallowed him. Though I understood a little bit more a little bit later, an inherited brain-chemistry thing, I never had a clue at the time. *Why did he never say anything to me?* I would have done all I could for him. I would have been the same friend to him he was to me. Sometimes a true friend is all it takes. Other times not, I get that, but why not even try? He probably stopped taking the medication. I never found out. The demon was invisible. We laughed, fought, stole, ate, drove, sang along with the car's eight-track, hunted for babes, and boozed. Not once did I ever feel or sense any of the deeply embedded, profound despair. Nothing even close, the darkness obscured by the false appearance of light, just that bizarre hand drawn tattoo and pills broke through to me as signals of the not-quite-right. Of course, that doesn't mean it wasn't there; it clearly was, and it's not about me anyway. It's about David Klugman, the baby Kaluga whale, his kindness, generosity, brotherhood, and agony, and our final farewell on the highway before his final farewell to all. May G-d rest his tortured soul, and I pray he finally found relief in *the world to come*, whereas mine in this world was still, if ever to be, a long and uncertain way from that bus terminal in Times Square. No matter. Here's matter: *see you on the other side, my dear lost friend, partner in crime, and fellow brawlin' Jewboy brother!*

Chapter II: *“America’s healthiest city”*

“If I had a hammer, I’d hammer out danger...” – Pete Seeger, Lee Hayes (1949)

Upon learning the staggering news of Kaluga’s abrupt and permanent departure from this world, I defaulted to the primal retreat, calling Mom, who, surprisingly, even after all we put each other through, came to my rescue. Her second marriage, the successful one, was to a world-class *mensh*, a “Jewish carpenter,” as we used to call him, ironically well noted, as he was both an old-world artisan of Hebrew and Dutch-German extraction, specializing in home improvements, extensions, and repairs. She met and hired Mr. David Ansell, while extending her own modest but comfortable dining room, elongating it by several feet, and adding a large bay window. He was a blue-eyed and silver-haired bull of a man, sort of a Clark Gable-looking type about twenty years her senior, and for them, it was love at first sight. To him, Ma’ was a real *hot number*, and a talented younger woman, a *babe* working as a busy, successful, interior designer, a profession that conveniently complemented his. That’s how it works when it works well—a close fit all around. The marriage to my father was just about completely undone (not a moment too soon, decades sooner would have been a lot better), so it was only a matter of a short time before the two of them hitched up and made a matrimonial go of it. She asked him to put me to work and help me find a place (anywhere but in her home and my former, *I had no home*), even temporarily, until I could maneuver better on my own. Since he knew I could be counted on to carry my weight and maybe then some, her son’d be of some reasonable use as a laborer, and for his love of her and a decent heart of his own, he complied. Hence began my brief career as a construction laborer, a job I’d just about get through every day by using all the strength and stamina I could muster at closing in on twenty.

It was brutal; I could barely keep up with the sixty-something year old guy, and though I was always in pretty decent shape, he was a virtual steam

engine powered jackhammer, all day, every day. Early each morning, I'd leave the furnished room he helped me find in Hempstead, a neighboring town to the Rock, and meet him at some designated location where he'd pick me up in his work station wagon and drive us to the job site. There, we'd meet-up with two other young carpenters, his steady crew, twin brothers, fraternal, tattooed from wrist to shoulder, quiet guys, competent with hammers and trowels, also atypical members of the tribe, and the back-busting, mind-numbing suffering in the heat of the summer sun would commence. Whether it was stripping used lumber of embedded nails, carrying stacks of roofing tiles up the ladder, or mixing concrete by shovel and trowel at four o'clock in the afternoon, it took all I had. The boss grew up during the Great Depression, so little to nothing went to waste—not lumber, not tiles, not concrete, not nothing, probably even salvaged the used nails for scrap metal. That was basically my job, the salvage guy, which took relatively little skill—just a lot of grit, tolerance, and sweat, complimented by splinters and calluses. This was work I was neither cut out for nor enjoyed but needed the pay for, so was grateful for putting me on, and stuck with it, giving it all I had until eventually, after only a few months, I found something a lot more my style and speed. *Trucking.*

The construction job lasted all the rest of the summer and well into the fall. The nights were spent drinking myself to sleep in the clean but lonely little, neatly kept furnished room in the white part of working-class Hempstead, sometimes even stopping by the local strip bar before heading back to the lonely little room for a beer or two and a moment's relief and entertainment, but these weren't five-star babes, barely even three, not off-Broadway talent moonlighting for rent money between gigs, just about attractive enough naked to be up there in the first place; otherwise, that was about the most that could be said for them. It was Hempstead, Long Island, not the Big Apple, center of the known universe. Anyway, one weekday work night, I caught an unexpected break. Just after walking in through the front door, before heading up the stairs to my second-floor bedroom, just past the living room, I happened to turn to my left and noticed the homeowner's daughter lounging on the big living room sofa, also by herself, watching TV. Her name was Analise—I'm not sure, something like that. We never spoke before, not a word, not even a glance, but I'm sure she was big as a

refrigerator, an industrial one, probably closing in on two hundred pounds. Not all fat either, mostly girth—a 'big-boned' brunette who looked like she coulda' played rugby, but with a kissable enough smile and an ample set of womanly *bazoongas* to bury myself between, so it was a *go*. She must have noticed me before, having probably lived there for a month or two before this particular evening towards the end of my stay, so she wasn't shy about inviting me to join her in the living room and onto the sofa next to her. And join her I did. Without so much as a pause for a quick shower, in no time flat, this hefty mama and I went at it like two uncaged wildcats in heat, right there on the living room couch, without my even knowing who else mighta' been home. Gathering my strength and determination, whatever was left over from the roof tiles and concrete, lying flat on her back, I hoisted her up by cradling the backs of her upper thighs with my forearms, and drove steadily forward into optimal position. No easy stunt for a compact Tomcat like me weighing in at only about 140 lbs, but it was 140 lbs of sheer determination, lust and muscle; so away into the sweet silken alley we did ride, all the way to a deep, slow slide of explosive conclusion. The whole event was as sudden as it was memorable. Those are often the best kinds, the ones you don't look for but that end up finding you—a surprise silver lining breaking through the dark clouds that often plagued the skies of my unsteady existence. "*A working-class hero is something to be,*" proclaimed the Walrus, and indeed, at times like that sudden encounter with a stranger in the night, the Walrus was right.

Staking my claim in a studio by the sea

Not long after that, perhaps even by the end of that week, we found a more comfortable spot for me to stake a claim by planting my flag; a one-room, ground-floor studio right on the beach in "America's healthiest city," the tagline slogan Long Beach adopted to describe itself, which, to my thinking, unless it was ironic, had no bearing whatsoever on anything at all characteristic of the place. To me, it was always a place to escape from the Rock, nearer than the city, for hedonism and all manner of debauchery, legal and otherwise. In other words, like Sinatra's *Chicago*, my kinda' town.

To get there, you had to cross the narrow Reynolds Channel by bridge from the mainland, a Democrat stronghold in a Republican county with its own police department and school district, where I always felt free and released from the everyday bondage of conformity that seemed to strangle the rest of the dull and mediocre lives in middle-class suburbia, i.e., the dreaded *morning regularity*. It was like a mini-Manhattan by the sea, offering real diversity and a conveniently placed microcosm of a larger cosmopolitan setting: diversity of class, race, religion, and politics. What else did you need? You could *hang ten* at designated surfer's beaches, or try to; ride bikes or jog along the boardwalk at all hours; swim night and day; play hockey in the ice rink, or take rides if you dared in the tiny, aged, and decrepit boardwalk amusement park left-over from its heydays in the twenties; bowl in the city's alley; get stoned watching films in one of the two local movie theaters, the western one, Long Beach's answer to the Uniondale Mini-Cinema showing classic rock concert films at midnight, with a relaxed door-policy (beer and weed without a hassle), get drunk, play pool, run for office, recover in its own well-run, fully equipped hospital, join the volunteer fire department, fist-fight, get laid, get lost, get found, get laid again, travel back and forth to Manhattan on its own Long Island Railroad line, and best of all, be basically left alone to be yourself as you so choose. Here I could always let loose, and sure as hell did, ever since way back in high school when we'd head out to the shore line to do our various and dirty misdeeds: buying weed, drinking underage in one of their many seedy "old-man" bars like the world-famous (dirty) *Dick's*, *Pappy's* under the boardwalk, and the centrally located *Brown* (bucket o' blood) *Derby Lounge*, and about a thousand more in the Irish-American west-end enclave, and flirting with underage girls and those of different races. No one from home saw what you did, and no one here cared. Permissive. Perfect.

Back in the Jazz Age

America's Healthiest City must have been quite a hotspot in the "roaring twenties," judging by the architecture of the formerly grand hotels along the two-mile boardwalk stretch, now aging gracelessly with decay and neglect, like the creaking, rusty Ferris wheel in the ramshackle amusement park.

They were looming art-deco-style constructions, some six or more stories tall: *The Lincoln Arms*, *The Promenade*, and the newer, more modern design, with polished chrome and brightly colored orange and yellow glass panel exteriors, *The King David*. The rest were older, with ornate concrete work; upper-floor balconies, many with huge, mounted floor-to-ceiling lobby mirrors; and once expensive, now peeling wallpaper abutting the mildewed wall-to-wall carpeting, stained and fraying beneath gaudy crystal chandeliers suspended from high ceilings above spacious ground-floor common areas and dining rooms.

All this suggested that at the time, these grand palaces were strictly for the *haves* of the day, honeymoons and holidays, and where many of the luckier *have-nots* scratched out meager livings serving them. Here was a coastal village close enough to the city to commute for work each day but far enough away from the constant intensity of competitive urban life to be a peaceful, restorative break from it. And I'll wager there were plenty of speakeasies around back then too, wetting the whistles of the thirsty during the ill-considered and singularly loony era of *prohibition*. Taking something away from people they already have, love, and crave only makes them want it more and become willing to do almost anything to get it back. Isn't that obvious? What were they thinking? A sober workforce would be more productive by turning ordinary citizens, the formerly law-abiding, into frustrated criminals? They were all just gonna quit drinking? Go to church instead? Spend their free afternoons at Confession or feeding the poor? Sure. Right away. Brilliant. Just brilliant. Protestants are usually pretty smart folks, okay? I mean, they founded the country, but sometimes? Gimme a break. What was gained beyond a new, ever-growing, and increasingly powerful bootlegging industry, created, fueled, and serviced by the consequently fantastically enriched gangsters of the now-*organized* crime world? It was easy to imagine Arnold "the Brain" Rothstein, "Legs" Diamond, "Lucky" Luciano, Meyer Wolfsheim, and Joe Kennedy slumming it up at the shore to the melodies and beats of Al Jolson and Josephine Baker, their dapper ghosts now strolling through the salt ocean breeze, respective entourages in tow, a parade of lost spirits hovering just above the loosening, splintering planks, cops and politicians on the payroll, conmen almost all, gentleman Jimmy Walker style, absent the really, really

bad ones still hiding behind cheap masks of false virtue, those are the ones you can't really trust or buy, so they have to be handled diplomatically—or, failing that, discreetly buried deep in the sand. At least with those on the take, you know where they stand, like the faded phantoms of unremarkable citizens congregating as worshipful spectators on the sidelines, nodding respectfully in silent approval, hoping for crumbs or mercy, at peace even in death with their craven greed and earthly cowardice.

On the topic, for almost certain there were undiscovered bodies buried under that boardwalk. I'd met one of the killers back in the county jail while enduring a less than peaceful thirty-day visit a few years back at the tender age of sixteen. The inmate was a trim, young, dark-haired Long Beach native dude by the name of Gino Barbieri, the name stuck, probably a mix of Puerto Rican and Italian, who was there for "a body," having bludgeoned an old man to death with a hammer to the head to make some kind of point or pick up some spare change, somebody's grandpa', who may or may not have robbed the corpse; he didn't say, I didn't ask. "*Banged that old dude, right tough to the dome,*" he dryly informed the gathered table of jailbird fans as he exhaled a *store-bought* smoke, matter-of-fact about it, implying it may not have been his first or even last. This creep was the first guy I'd ever heard confess to and actually boast casually about a murder, thus the remembered name. And there was no good reason, given the circumstances, to doubt him. But could this really be the only case? Every body discovered? Every case cracked? Doubtful. So there were ghosts about. That was almost certain. That is to say, if there were ghosts anywhere at all, then surely a few of them were lingering here about the boardwalk, haunting the otherwise mostly forgotten surf.

All that was missing to complete the carnival of macabre scene were the long awaited, much hoped for, yet still elusive arrival of gambling casinos, another phantom. Even today, the local politicians regularly promise to get the state laws changed so they can finally be built and everyone in town will get a piece of the action, a sacred dream shared by every resident, a steady delusion uniting all classes, races, and parties. Cops and criminals alike, cops for the likely *take* or at least the highly paid moonlighting security gigs, guns for hire, and for criminals, well, it's obvious. Degenerate

gamblers run out of funds quickly, so there's always a network of pawnshops, fences, loan sharks, and enforcers to swoop in and clean up. Even prostitutes, up and down the scale, from street walkers giving blowjobs in alleys to expensive madams in five-star brothels, everyone gets their share of *tricks* and *Johns* to fill their coffers. And it's always gambling season, *right?* So *now* would be as good as *then* and much better than *never*, but even as the hope remained undiminished, they had as yet not arrived—not even a date or a timeline for a date. It was basically a dream, and it was likely the ghosts that objected, and their restless spirits operating from beyond had the last word as casinos and the accompanying hubbub might disturb their rest. I dunno. Ghosts don't talk to me. I can only guess. But the decadent glory of Long Beach past would not be resurrected. Instead, by the 1970s, the once swanky seaside hotels were used to house the hundreds of mental patients newly released from overcrowded state institutions, a "dumping ground," as they called it, now freely roaming the boardwalk night and day, awkwardly muted like the zombies in *Night of the Living Dead*. If you couldn't fit in here, *America's Healthiest City*, or at least stay comfortably under the radar and be tolerated among the more stable and sane, without standing oddly out like I always felt in the Rock, it was hopeless. You might as well check yourself into one of these former luxury establishments, surrender your Social Security number, and take your medications—or, like Kaluga, check yourself out entirely, an option I never considered no matter how dire the circumstances appeared. So, another new beginning and fresh start, this time in Long Beach, hoping for greater success than in the Cub Scouts, high school, Topic House, the Navy, California, or Impala, I'd stake a claim, make a stand, and begin my happily ever after life as a free-lance, beachcombing, wild-eyed playboy.

Anyway, aside from the occasional murder or drowning among the general public, the crazy people (often the victims) never bothered anybody nor anybody, them. The atmosphere they helped create fit perfectly with the eerie menace the whole place radiated from the channel to the sea, along with the indulgence of sinister hedonism wafting up from the sand through the gaps between the withered planks of the aged boardwalk and the cracking cement veneers of the defunct hotel-cum-loony-bins. Yes, I really dug it. The whole city was like an *Addams family* theme park; huge old pre

war homes just off the beach, a few of them abandoned mansions probably occupied by more ship-wrecked ghosts; white stucco and red tile, slate roofs, multi-story, decaying castles of ten or twenty rooms, some still in acceptable repair on huge and often unkempt multi-acre lots covered with overgrown sea grass, sand dunes and beach shrubbery; others, like the hotels, their best were days long gone. All I wanted and needed was a place to hang my hat, settle myself, close the door and try to fit in like a normal adult citizen, forget the *outlaw* fantasy, and here was obviously a decent and timely chance. Here *it should be easy*, advised the voice, and in an easily managed and comfortable bachelor's pad on the beach? At just twenty years old and with all that I'd already been through up to that point, I couldn't have asked for more. But first, before completely settling fully in, I needed work—a new job that unexpectedly and unintentionally turned out to be a more than decade-long career: *trucking*.

Tommy Hayes to the rescue.

"You up for workin' tomorrow?" "Sure," I answered, always up for making a good, clean, quick few bucks. "Doing what?" I knew when he called it would be good news. One of my tightest pals and sparring partners never had bad news, always a good idea, like *let's get drunk*, *let's start a fight*, sit in his finished basement, drink beer and shoot his CO₂ pellet gun at the growing stack of empty cans, listen to tunes on his outstanding Marantz, practice *nunchaku*, or play some chess, and now would be no exception. "Working for Jimmy Deodato. He's a mover, a gypsy trucker, moving people's houses, apartments, their furniture, anything they want, anywhere they want to go, in his truck. He pays in cash each day, good pay, \$5 an hour. You in?" "Definitely," music to my ears, especially the cash each day part and working along with my friend, and if it worked out so I could depend on more? I could say *thanks* and *goodbye* to *Jackhammer Dave* the magnificent steam engine and the backbreaking, hand-tearing labor, mixing concrete by shovel after a hard day's work like a slave in Egypt, and so it went, liberated by Tommy Hayes, my always dependable redeemer. It would be my first day of trucking life, and the next morning I dove right in, just my speed, active movement through time and space, a *mover*, the flow

of constant action, the physicality, and ever-changing scenery. It was heavy work at times: an upright piano, sofas up flights of stairs, heavy cartons of books and glass, etc., but this could be handled, it wasn't boring, and best of all, I'd never get another *pain-in-the-fucken-ass* splinter.

James Deodato Sr. was a middle-aged, local, unsung legend: a garden apartment building superintendent on the south side of the Rock who was quietly known as the go-to guy for some of the town's bad-boys in need of a bit of adult masculine guidance, of which I was proudly one. In the juvenile delinquent phase of my lunatic criminal career, at sixteen years of age, along with two other boys that were eighteen at the time, two of us, minus the driver who was let-off scot-free, made *Newsday*, the main Long Island newspaper, (see *Kabbo*: Volume I) for a vandalism caper we pulled, so in a local sense, I was the infamous *Kabbo*, the kid who threw rocks through windows and set fire to the car and went to jail for it, *Kabbo*, the kid who wasn't just suspended from school but expelled, so he'd already heard something about me and knew was the type of young fella he specialized in; boys with absent or weak fathers, young men heading in the wrong direction, needing help straightening out at a crucial time, before it was too late, help becoming adult men, not just alive long enough to make it chronologically but character-wise, straight and strong. He was another bull of a man, a short-legged, barrel-chested, broad-shouldered guy, with forearms like Popeye's, no tattoos, didn't need any cheap accouterments, and a fearsome face, looking as much like a prize-fighter or a bulldog as a regular human, thinning, silver-streaked, dark hair combed straight back, a pug nose, jowls bookending a strong, jutting chin and jaw, probably like two hundred and twenty pounds, maybe more, most of which was concentrated in his chest, shoulders, upper back and neck, who smoked a pipe and *De Nobili* cigars while he drove his compact and sturdy 14' long and 11' high, deep red, four-on-the-column box truck to the bank after using it to haul anything (legal) people would pay him to. In another life, he could easily have been a *caporegime*. He just had that look and demeanor designed to give orders. "Jimmy, you Sicilian?" "Nablitan," he'd quickly respond with immediate finality, accentuated by a perfect southern Italian accent, though the guy was Brooklyn-born and bred, as if the question was an insult he wanted redressed immediately. When he got frustrated, say in traffic, he'd

call transgressors "*pineapples*" or "*meatballs*" instead of something crude or vulgar, trying to stay a gentleman by keeping his anger in check as an example of moderation and restraint, not that he was always above occasional profanity or regular malapropisms. For instance, when discussing Hitchcock's classic film, *The Birds*, he'd casually refer to it as "*that movie, the fucken' Birds*" or call Alzheimer's *oldtimers* and would never let any of his three kids be anybody's *escape goat*. No explanation and we didn't ask. He was unintentionally hysterical, but we didn't laugh, not then. Later on? Over beers, of course, but not to his face. Never. Not that he was delicate or fragile in any way, but why risk it? We sensed he had some kind of past best left private; you could feel it just from the one-handed pipe lighting as he drove technique enhancing his overall papa-bear presence. All we knew was that he was a combat vet (Korea in the trenches), raised in Brooklyn by the docks, Greenpoint, who we respected and admired as much as we feared. When he'd have to brake for pedestrians crossing at a red light, he'd come within inches of tapping them. It was a breathless drama each time, but amazingly, he had that kinda' effortless, precise control over his double-axled, rolling red baby and never hit anybody. And most impressively, he was as reliable as the morning sun. On time. Always. No excuses, none needed. Just the kind of discipline I needed: responsible, the word-deed bond, and when it came to pay? I was fully incentivized. He'd hand us a wad of cash every afternoon, just as reliably. Even if it was just a roll of singles covered with a twenty, it looked and felt like a lot, and we felt like men, real men on his crew, receiving it. Real men earn their way in life by doing an actual job. They pull their weight by performing a real service people would willingly pay for, an honest task you don't need any fancy talk to explain, one that only men can perform and get rewarded in kind. You don't see a lot of ladies humping sofas up flights of stairs or hoisting them from apartment building rooftops to deliver through living room windows when compact elevators aren't an option, so there was pride in that. Earned pride, masculine pride, the only kind worth anything to us.

By this time, with that cool apartment, my name on the lease, and my backyard a small patch of garden separated from the sand by nothing more than a low, painted white cinderblock barrier, maybe three or four feet high off the dirt, easy to climb leading right under the boardwalk, life felt worth

living. This place I wanted to keep, so if that meant regular work, then that's what it meant. The trick would be to find something I actually liked to do and people I liked to do it with, and now it seems like, thanks to my school days' blood brother pal Hannibal Hayes, I found one. Jimmy hired us bad boys who had run-ins or close calls with the law, usually two, or three of us at a time, to help with his jobs. We were all young enough, strong enough, and eager enough to make it work for everyone involved: Jimmy, his customers, and ourselves. If you didn't want to do it, you just didn't show up. That's all. But if you came, you brought your full attention and commitment. There was no room for fucken' around on the job, so everyone was focused on the same goals: get the jobs done and get them done right. First, that meant being on time and, second, with as little damage as possible. Just shoot straight, pardon the pun. Jimmy was all man, no question, and we wanted to be men, no question there either, which meant pleasing him by living up to his standards and expectations. That's how it's done, like with Mike Wilkinson (Kabbo: Volume I) in the pan, only voluntarily, and the world of difference here is not just the sticks, like then, with Topic House and the courts and the ever-present threat of prison bars looming, but here in the free world, with carrots like the De Naboli "guinea stinkers" and bundles of cash, and the earned respect of a formidable man, like now.

Once, Greg, another brooding, bull-necked, and powerfully built but troubled youth and pal of Hannibal's, Douchebag's, and mine, quietly asked, hypothetically probing, after a brief afternoon card-game break at Cal's, a local independent gas and repair station Jimmy and a few other neighborhood blue-collar regulars frequented for a quick hand or two of Five Card Draw for lunch money bets, if he might ever consider doing a robbery or burglary with us, maybe a stickup. We had access to peoples' homes and their trust, usually people with a bit more lunch money and assorted sellable valuables. Again, without pause, Jimmy answered, just as quietly but with a perfect deadpan message of quiet seriousness—no hostility, sarcasm, contempt, or condescension—in no way overdone, just sincerity—that he wouldn't, *no*, because if he did, he'd have to kill us to make sure we never ratted on him and so endanger his family. Okay, Roger that. Over. That was the last time that subject ever came up. Case closed. His family? What little we knew of them was that his older brother Jacky, allegedly even

tougher than Jimmy, was a tugboat captain in the New York Harbor (figures), and that Jimmy married Mary (though rumor had it that it was common-law), a former nun, and they had three kids together, two girls and a boy. Of them, we knew: Jimmy junior, the middle kid, a young bull of a boy I taught *nunchaku* to, and the girls, who looked more like Jimmy than Mary, poor kids. So, luckily, there were never any of those boy-girl issues between us. We could see how well he cared for and treated them, protective without overbearing, and how much respect they too had for him—none of the usual backtalk or bickering. It was clear it wasn't simply out of fear, though maybe just a little, a healthy bit, just enough to keep them in line without alienating anyone. He probably never raised a hand to them, not even his voice, at least not that we ever saw or heard. He didn't have to, totally unnecessary; it was earned respect, same as with his crew. As I said, Jimmy took care of business and reliably never broke his word. Not once. "*Call me at eight,*" or "*be here at six,*" he'd say at the end of the day, referring to whatever the next day's start time was, occasionally adding a "*don't fail me*" to punctuate the urgency, and if you got there even just one minute after the designated start time, you'd have to chase that little red truck down to a red light and then quickly open the door and climb on board. It happened to me exactly once. He wouldn't wait thirty seconds. He wasn't gonna be late just because you were. He wasn't even going to slow down. It was that simple. He kept his word like that, and in that way, by example, we learned to keep ours too, starting, naturally enough, with being on time, all the time.

A brawl with a citizen made a good first impression

That first day as a professional moving man and trucker's helper was a doozy. By noon, it seemed I already blew it, *yet again*. It was a big moving job he had Tommy recruit for the night before, and it was in *the city*, which meant action, excitement, and adventure. To me, going to the city was the best. It was a done deal for me ever since that night as a small child, being driven in the backseat, blindfolded by my parents, to the center of the towering, glittering island kingdom in celebration of his fourth or fifth birthday. After parking and a brief stroll, they took off the cloth blindfold and

stunned me with the sudden revelation of the overwhelming energy of dynamic human creativity. It was a surprise night in Times Square. Looking up at the astonishing immensity, the smoking billboards and flickering neon lights showering down on me, piercing the silent sky with all the power, color, sound and intensity of an electrified society at its most vibrant and creative, forever seared by that indelible impression, it was where I knew I had to be. Somehow, I'd find a way to draw from and contribute to it, in whatever capacity, "a part of it," with any specific purpose merely a secondary consideration. It was a matter of where over what, why, and how. I'd find a way to get there, like today, to make some dough as a working man. Absolutely perfect. Anywhere else—Paris, London, Rome, Beijing, Moscow, the moon, whatever—they were black-and-white "B" movies. Keep'm.

Years before, after being booted from sleep-away camp at the end of the first of what was supposed to be eight weeks, Buck's Rock (Kabbo: Volume I), my blessed grandmother's live-in boyfriend, Sol, the lawyer, a corpulent, balding, with a booming baritone barrister and part-time judge (they, too, told everyone they were married, but later, after they split up, she confided they were just shackled-up, living in sin, and enjoying every minute of it until she threw him out, calling him the "legal liar," no questions asked), gave me a summer job. The decent-to-me guy hired the *bad seed* to help consolidate and move his large suite of small offices in an older downtown Brooklyn building by the courts to a more manageable and modest single-room office in the same building on a lower floor, as he was entering the emeritus zone. It was just me and a couple of the building custodians, over the summer, a room section at a time, carefully, methodically, going through everything, every folder, envelop, document, and file cabinet, inventorying and organizing the contents, typewriters and notepads, pens and pencils, stamps, and subway tokens, down to the unused staples, rubber bands, and paperclips, sorting, storing, or discarding. The *legal liar* was another Depression Era lad, so nothing was wasted, and it gave me some experience with carefully lifting heavy furniture, using dollies, hand-trucks, moving pads, freight elevators, and the rest, keeping things arranged and ordered while secure in transit. Today's move was a new experience, a level up the moving man ladder, a fancy, luxury high-rise apartment building

that had strict rules about conducting business on the premises, particularly when it came to which elevators could be used by contractors and service vendors and which could not, and I either unknowingly or uncaringly, for efficiency's sake, thinking it was no big deal, used the wrong one, the passenger, not the freight. Since no one hassled me, I kept on with it, loading up the furniture and boxes before taking an almost full car down, until someone—a tenant—got in and did.

A real flamer in a pink corduroy suit and a gold-colored scarf, a middle-aged dandy carrying a pocketbook, gets on board a floor or two below on the way down. He was incensed at the temerity of a serf like me using the passenger elevator instead of the freight, inconveniencing the royal tenants and condo owners, and expressed his intense displeasure to the point where, during the concise verbal exchange, maybe after I told him to “shut up” and “mind your own business, *faggot*,” he tried to whack me over the head with that fancy pocketbook, swinging it wildly again and again, but in the chaos of the melee, guess what happened? It got broke. The leather strap snapped, and the bag tore open, its contents scattering. Though I never laid a hand on him, I did block the throws with my shoulders and forearms, and that's when it ripped. As soon as we landed in the lobby, he jumped out, now frantic, complaining hysterically to the building manager, who just happened to be there chatting it up with a few other residents and visitors, as if he had just narrowly escaped a close call with a disrespectful and violent little twerp who forgot his place. This overworked, overweight schlep with multiple key rings dangling from his garrison belt gripping a walkie-talkie like it was a German stick grenade, though noticeably less unhinged, was obliged to put on a show, so he glared at me as though he too was shocked and disgusted by my unconscionable impudence, then, echoing the offended party, turned and complained to my boss, who just happened to be standing right there too, the whole overdone display right in front of the gathered morning crowd adding even more pressure to the scene. Now with all three facing me, I braced for doom, the ax, yet another “get lost” when, much to my surprise and relief, Jimmy took my side and stood up for his guy by firmly telling them both to *back off* and *leave him alone*, that it was *no big deal* and he'd handle it, and to just let me *get back to work* before quietly instructing me to *use the other elevator*. This left the

guy with the broken pocketbook strap steaming, wanting my blood and compensation for his damaged property, as if someone else forced him to try to use it as a medieval mace instead of a bag for his tampons and eyeliner, but again, Jimmy D was having none of it. Of course, with his calm, quick and certain words buffeted by the implied menace of his physical presence, they both backed right down, let it go and that was that. I'm sure crossing him never entered their minds. They must have initially thought he'd take their side against this punk, as did I, and as most other contractors in similar circumstances probably would have. Not this time, though. Surprise, surprise. And so it went. I was now in the fold. I think my new boss even appreciated the fact that I wouldn't back down or cower at the authority represented by *His Royal Tenancy, the Offended Nobel*, who got the worse end of a deal. He could just as well have made the point, then dropped it or laughed it off before the damage was done. He didn't have to turn it into a battery case, so the broken bag was largely on him. Too bad, *Lord Fauntleroy!* You got a little more *rough and tumble* than you bargained for. That's all. Now go somewhere and lick your wounds, or whatever else it is you like to lick. But from then on, I was grateful and loyal to Jimmy and more careful about elevators. Lesson learned. With that, I made the team, case closed, and the trucking career kept rolling.

Aside from that early, petty scuffle, the job was going pretty smoothly. Jimmy knew what he was doing and how to direct, “send down” this or that, very specific: cartons, wardrobes, tables, and desks; flat things; heavy things; sturdy at the bottom, building up from the floor base of the truck to the roof; light on the top; fragile stuff either buried in cove-like pockets between shapes or placed high up on the heavier items. If the truck had a peak over the cab, it was perfect for delicate cargo and would be filled first. Some of the bigger items, like fragile mirrors or paintings, needed to be covered with thick moving pads and tied to the interior truck panels, or nested between box springs and mattresses set in upright positions. Loading the truck properly, meaning making efficient use of limited space, was the key to a safe and successful move. That required some experience, specifically the arrangement of a carefully distributed balance on a weighted, geometrically solid support structure. I'd later discover that opening the truck's rear at the destination was the *moment of truth*. How

much shifting in transit caused how much damage? Zero was the goal, so careful planning was practiced by an experienced hand. And that? Jimmy surely was. The guy really knew how to make the most out of the least; that was clear right away. The income he made from these side jobs, supplemented by the reduced super's rent, kept his close-knit family comfortably stationed in the Rock's middle class, like delicate items in coves, and for Jimmy Deodato, family was everything.

Although this was a big job—probably a two-bedroom luxury apartment—and the clock was running, we had to be out of the building by five. Despite that hard deadline, at about noon, we broke for lunch. Exiting out through the service entrance, me, the boss, Hannibal, and a fourth guy, maybe Greg, walked a block or two to a local tavern that served midday meals; a Manhattan-style, blue-collar barroom that sold booze and hot lunches, which Jimmy paid for, including a tall mug of fresh, cold tap beer for each of us to wash down the corn-beef and cabbage open-faced sandwiches; a man-sized feast. Wow. This was great, treated like a man by a real one. You wanted to live up to his expectations and would work to do it, overcoming childish laziness, procrastination, and lame excuses. That's how it works when done right. A grownup sets the example; the right grownup and the right example, then the up-and-comer is inspired, not coerced, to follow. After the job's completion, back in the Rock, and a hard and long day's work behind me, he handed me fifty dollars, which at that point in my working life was definitely the most money I ever made in a single day—forty in salary and a ten-dollar tip. Wow again. A score, a legal one, honestly earned, and a job I could handle and be proud of, so with all that, I was hooked from the start. Giving Jackhammer Dave notice we wrapped it up on good terms, and from then on and for the next stage of my life throughout my twenties and into my early thirties, except for the aborted start of the Arkay Trucking empire, I'd "*keep on' truckin', pretty mama, truck my blues away.*"

Of course, like a lotta' Catholics raised in the '40s and '50s who felt the need for someone to hate and feel superior to, like a desig'nated villain, before Vatican II, he let a quiet moment of Judeophobic derangement slip. One time, in the apartment building basement headquarters of Jimmy Deodato

enterprises, around Christmas, as we stood close facing each other in the little corner workshop space and he was handing over my day's pay, just the two of us in that discrete spot, he asked: "How does it feel to be a Jew at Christmas time?" Huh? As if I felt left out, or envious, or I dunno, whatever, a Jew, the total summation of my being reduced to a single syllable. The question didn't make much sense to me; it never felt like anything other than a celebration my friends enjoyed, and I was happy for them. Why not? That was it, the whole deal. They didn't need me to follow their "gospel," and I didn't need them to follow mine; to each their own, as the saying goes; it's twentieth-century America, not medieval Europe, so the whole topic was moot. To Jimmy, though (with the former nun for a wife), it musta' seemed like a big deal until I shrugged my shoulders and answered, "It feels fine. Merry Christmas, Jimmy. Why do you ask?" Another case closed. He seemed to have taken it in stride, maybe he was just curious, and never brought it up again, but as they say in Arabia, like a fly once spotted in the milk, you can remove the fly, but you can't remove the memory of the fly. I was "a Jew," like many of the people that hired him, whom he probably quietly resented. Yes, sir, guilty as charged, sir. That's me. A Jew. Straight up, baby. Deal with it—horns and a tail—right from Sinai.

Anyway, despite that particular human failing, which we all have, one or another, or more, the man was what they call a *role model*, one I will always be grateful to for his encouragement, confidence, and example, and to my buddy Tommy for the intro. As I said, because of him and with the help of my mom and a few other surrogate "dads" and mentors she found for me, I eventually became my own boss, with my own trucks and customers, making my own comfortable living doing what I pleased while enjoying all the effort and every mile. Like Mom-Mom Sylvia told me, *if you love what you do, you'll never work a day in your life*. But there was still a lot more rocky road to travel before those saner and more stable days might arrive. Back then, each day was still very much a wild card, like that first one in the luxury building elevator.

Another ticket to a short ride

Getting around was always a hassle. Needing to travel from the beach to the Rock and arrive by six or seven in the AM to meet Jimmy D or Jackhammer required a very early get-up time and a journey beginning with a ten-minute walk to the bus stop, then two bus rides, one quick one to the central station and another for the half-hour trip to the destination bus stop, ending with yet another ten-minute walk, whatever the weather. The mornings were bad enough, but the afternoons, when the workday ended, were worse. Just when you wanted to be home and relax with a shower followed by a bottle of wine and a joint, you had to repeat the process in reverse, back to the beach. So, maybe it was impulsive, buying that first set of wheels, but it was an impulse that had been building for years. I never had a car in high school, and, aside from "borrowing" my dad's for midnight expeditions and an occasional girlfriend's, like another big boobed brunette, a teenage Jewish mama attracted to bad boys, twice my size (yeah, more than a few of them were) named Karen, I had almost no driving experience. On late-night dates, mainly boozing and smooching to the eight-track, chick stuff like Peter Frampton or Loggins and Messina, Karen would relent and let me drive hers. Once behind the wheel I'd thrill myself by flooring it, pedal to the metal down a quiet suburban avenue, terrifying her, much to my sadistic delight, and thoughtlessly tempt fate. Funny though, these repeated encounters were a lot like *Ignats and Krazy Kat* cartoons: she was an undaunted feline in love and he was a vicious rat, throwing bricks at her head. After promising her again and again that if she trusted me *this time* and let me drive again, *this time I really promise*, I wouldn't go nuts with the gas-pedal power and terrorize her again, and I was truly sorry about the last time. Though it took some convincing and smooching, she'd relent and I'd pull the same stunt, only slowing down after my fill of accelerating rushes, accompanied by the added thrill of her frantic shrieking. It was great. A night out with Kabbo, truly a lotta' bad-boy fun.

More to the point, though I mighta' even somehow had a legit driver's license, schlepping around everywhere, even to buy groceries without wheels, made life a drag. Buses, hoofing it, mooching off friends, and hitchhiking were my only means, and by twenty years old, I was sick of them all—the whole pathetic scene. So one day, while riding in the jalopy of a young, long-haired, farmer-hippie looking dude in blue jean overalls and a

black leather jacket who picked me up hitching, I couldn't even tell you what make it was, finally fed up, asked the guy to sell it to me. Now. Right now. I offered him \$300 for it—an offer he couldn't refuse—my entire savings account, if he drove me to the bank and let me keep the plates. Just give me the keys; no paperwork necessary or wanted, and I'll drop you off wherever you say. The guy was dumbfounded; the car was ready for the junk heap and probably not even worth its weight in scrap metal unless it was delivered to the yard, but I was as determined as impulsive. Well, once he saw this was serious, he readily agreed, and that's how I got my first car.

She was a big blue sedan from the sixties, maybe a Pontiac, maybe a 350 motor, definitely a lot of horsepower, and leaked and burned oil by like a quart every two or three days, which had me learning how to keep a car alive the way life taught me just about everything else, by necessity, aka *the hard way*, like getting down on my knees at the rear every morning to check the color of the exhaust fumes to see if the engine needed another dose, white smoke instead of clear, and alive it kept until I don't know when, but remember driving it to Jackhammer Dave, proudly showing off that I was now mobile and no one else bought it for me, I was handling life, sort of, and he told me to just keep feeding it oil and it would be alright, and for a while, a couple of months maybe, it was. Also, the benefit of keeping the plates meant no need to deal with onerous, *pain-in-the-ass* statutory responsibilities like laws, e.g., registering, inspecting, or insuring the heap, so I was free now to get back and forth without having to stand in the rain or cold waiting for a bus to come, or come late, interfering with my game plan. It was only a couple of months later, when parked somewhere off a desolate highway by the beach, miles from home, after getting out to take a leak, that I tried to turn it over, but she wouldn't start, probably only a dead battery or dirty gas filter, but impulsive again (What? Call a tow truck?), just took off the plates and left her wherever she was, hitchhiking away. Not so easy come but very easy go this time, and it would be months, after the winter, before I'd buy another. That one, however, would be a much less impulsive upgrade to a beautiful, bronze-colored, luxury *Olds 98*, but that's another Long Beach tale of momentary glory followed by impulsivity, and another dangerous and blunderous stunt, for another time.

Venu, vidi, surripui

Before ditching the blue behemoth I put her to work, not just going back and forth between straight jobs, but now I could go shopping, or more precisely, shoplifting with wheels, in a getaway car of my own, like Kaluga's, only on these solo runs I'd be the wheelman as well. *This opportunity wasn't to be wasted*, advised the quiet voice. I could hit multiple spots, sometimes the same day, a little here, a little more there, covering a wider range, keeping my profile low that way, not wanting to become a familiar sight to any of the marks, more like an occasional phantom that comes and goes before being noticed. Measured by frequency and volume, a considerable case of kleptomania set in, so it wasn't. Yeah, I was hooked. As a boy, sure, a few of us rebels would head into the local candy store or uptown to Woolworths and come out with pockets full of loot, candy, Matchboxes, baseball cards, turtles, hamsters, etc., but that was just kid stuff for fun and kicks. This time it was going to be for bread and butter, and a touch of good ol' Long Island alchemy, turning hot merchandise into cold cash. Yeah, I also played the role of fence, selling the swag. Over time, my techniques grew more sophisticated and bolder, even right up to the line of recklessness, so eventually there was a sudden fall, or two, actually, before the fever passed, but before that? Man, did I eat well, and man, did I dig these rushes. Of course, there were routine stops on the itinerary, but never in Long Beach, where the consequences for being caught there, home turf, were unjustifiable and unnecessary; rather, at the busiest times, late afternoon weekdays when I'd load up, it was shopping malls and supermarkets on the other side of the channel. After pulling into the parking lot of the designated day's target and finding a spot as close to the entrance as possible, walking in and immediately approaching a cashier, in a quiet, confident and casual voice ask for a paper bag, a big one, as if mine had ripped or otherwise needed replacing or supplementing. No one ever asked: *what for?* They didn't care; it was just another task on the clock and easy to fulfill. *Sure, here's a bag; here's two; have a party.* Next, the master thief headed to a strategically selected end of an aisle, towards a corner near the rear, opened the empty bag, placed it in an out-of-the-way corner, not hidden, not in anyone's way either, and then started making the rounds, up and down the aisles and around the store's interior perimeter only once, never circling

back or repeating the trail, as if conducting a one-time survey, choosing the heavier, flat-sided cartons first, followed by cans and jars of the most expensive stuff I liked, depositing them on the bottom, neatly packed, snugly fit, layer upon layer on top, until the bag was filled with a king's ransom's worth of delicacies, from Nova Scotia lox to Swiss Knight cheese to filet mignons. It's like loading a truck, only smaller. Same principles, only on the sly. Once the bag was roughly three-quarters full, I'd just pick it up—nonchalance was always key—and walk right out with it, as if by body language alone, not only the bag but the entire world belonged to me via attitude, discretion, and nerve. Unless someone spotted you doing it and watched until you exited the store, no one would suspect that the grocery bag full of stock hadn't been paid for. It may have looked a little odd for a brief moment, coming in and out of a casual observer's focus, making deposits into a brown paper bag rather than a shopping cart or walking through a supermarket with an already full grocery bag, but the leap to *theft* was never made by ordinary citizen-shoppers or even store clerks, too busy themselves to care enough about what someone else may have been doing, provided there was no interference with their own tasks.

Hence, at subsequent eating club events, man, did we ever feast. That also meant, as a bonus, more money for weed, wine, booze, and broads. Opening my refrigerator was quite a sight, and honestly, if you'll indulge the delusion, knowing I got it for 'free' made it all the more satisfying, like an Abbie Hoffman disciple, a *Steal This Book* devotee, cheating the system, the universe, getting back at it for all the perceived disadvantages life threw at me. And the rush, yes, the adrenaline rush, knowing the stakes, possibly being caught, humiliated, incarcerated, maybe even worse, or maybe just failing, kleptomania had its hook in me deep, and with it I did ride, from the moment I hit the ignition, knowing my mission, until mission completed, unpacking, loading, and closing the refrigerator door.

The cash came almost as easily: heading to a shopping mall department store, say Lord & Taylor's at Green Acres on a busy afternoon, parking my getaway machine as close as possible to an entrance/exit, dressed in casual sports attire, clean and well-groomed, the program would begin and the adrenaline would flow. This time the targets were leather jackets,

essential fashion for suburban cool cats and make-believe tough guys, new and expensive ones, average sizes. The only security to consider was the uniformed and plain-clothed employees and, of course, possibly being unknowingly spotted and followed by regular store staff. You couldn't really tell if you were being observed or not; there might even be hidden surveillance cameras. You could only be as discreet as possible and hope you weren't, so the adrenaline would mount and mount until a minute or two after exiting the store, and then, relieved to discover that no one was coming after you, the flow dropped to a less intense level, but the rush was a big part of the hook, maybe the biggest, a "natural high," making the entire exercise, start to finish, as compelling as exhilarating. Next, once safely out of the store with my loot, the mission was to unload it, i.e., turn it into cash by finding a customer for the fencing operation, so I'd scan the mall for guys that looked like they might wear that type of jacket and it might fit, approach them, again, with my well-practiced, casual confidence, no big deal, explain that *my girlfriend bought me the wrong-sized jacket, she lost the receipt, so the store wouldn't take it back, and was now trying to get back some of what she spent*, asking for fifty dollars for a never-worn, two hundred-dollar classic black leather. That was generally a pretty easy sell. Folks in malls, "consumers," are there to spend money anyway, and this was an offer some couldn't refuse, a classic win-win-lose, and one or two per outing was all it took to fill the tank, the refrigerator, and the home bar. Again, I felt like a master thief, totally justified too: *off the pig! Power to the people! Property is theft*, whatever, but definitely *Steal (and sell) This Leather Jacket*. Abbie would surely thumb's up my nobel audacity.

The *klepto* binge lasted for several months, and it took being busted not once but twice to snap out of it. The first time was at the mall, and it was a real thriller. After exiting the store, leather jacket draped casually over my arm, again like the world belonged to me, my radar still set on low-alert, not immediately, but several minutes later, after the adrenaline dropped a bit, still cautiously confident I'd gotten away with it again, now in fence mode, scanning the crowd for a buyer, when, from about seventy yards away, spotted a group of men, maybe five or six, down at the far end of the inner lane, walking a bit too quickly and in my direction, triggering an inner alarm by their speed, numbers, and timing, signaling the target was probably me.

It was definitely time to move, so I quickly pivoted in the opposite direction and took off as fast as I could towards the nearest mall exit, the floor-to-ceiling, thick, plate glass doors about twenty yards away, maybe a five second dash. Not knowing which way they opened, in or out, I had no choice but to just go for it, full speed towards them, pushing outwards, no time to stop and check, just praying they weren't designed the other way, as that would be quite bad. I wasn't as agile (or desperate) as that dude in downtown LA (Kabbo: Volume I), and these panels were much thicker; if they shattered, I mighta' been sliced to pieces. Luckily, though, it was called right, so I *broke on through to the other side*, and, like the Lizard King cried out, kept on breaking, but as soon as I took off, dropping the jacket to run, they started running too. The chase was on. Now, racing through the parking lot at full throttle, maybe only sixty seconds after taking off, one or two of them (must've been high school or college athletes), kicked it into high gear, sped forward, caught up, and tackled me to the pavement. Within another second or two, hot on my tail, the others were on top of me too, but since I gave no fight (what for?), they just grabbed me, pulled me up to my feet, surrounded, gripping my shoulders and upper arms, escorted me back in, past all the gawking shoppers like *public enemy number one*, down to the lower-level mall security office, where they took and copied my ID, photographed me, and warned me about ever setting foot there again, advising that from that point forward I'd be a *trespasser* and subject to arrest. With that, after the afternoon melodrama, aside my ego, my body unbruised, they let me go. *Fair enough*, the voice suggested, *I'm still plenty ahead, time to quit, at least from this angle*, and so that was that. No more leathers. But the case was not fully closed; the fever, though diminished, was still running too high. If I wasn't boosting at least once a week, I was obsessing about it, each day with increasing intensity. The only relief imaginable was fulfillment, a true "Jones" if ever there was one.

Next up, the second and final time, only a few weeks later, was a much less serious score, a fat London Broil for dinner tucked into the waist of my pants, but with more serious consequences. This time, the big, Latino, uniformed security guard saw and grabbed me, *Jean Valjean*, though he seemed almost apologetic, and this time I didn't even try to run. Not sure why. I could've probably gotten away, but at some level, I mighta' wanted to

get caught, pay a price, and bring it to an end. The kleptomania mania had by now become an obsessive drag. It all but consumed me, like a drug or gambling addiction, waking up to thoughts of *what am I going to steal today?* I didn't know how to just stop, so, figured I might let this stop it for me. This time the cops were called, and I was collared, cuffed, and charged with *petty larceny*, a misdemeanor, then let go at the station house with a court date, which I graciously attended, paid the fifty-dollar fine, took the conviction, another merit badge to add to my collection, and then laid the whole enterprise to rest. After being busted twice, from both angles, I was fully able to let it go. Cured. The fever passed. Forgive me, Abbie, though it was exciting fun, I could feed and clothe myself without thievery, especially without petty thievery, and there were other rushes available out there, as yet unexplored, to be enjoyed. It was fun for a bush-league sociopath, and *crime paid* while it lasted, but despite that, honest work, or some approximation of it, generally speaking and on the whole, even with the short-cuts yet to be disclosed, while not much of a heart-thumping rush, carrying boxes, making deliveries, or mixing concrete, was a lot more practical and, taken all together, was more rewarding, I eventually decided.

“Call me Sunday night, seven sharp. Don't fail me.”

Speaking of which, the job with Jimmy D turned out not to be a full-timer, as *gypsy Jim* was a freelancer, juggling airport jobs (pick-ups and drop-offs), trucking, and routine apartment building maintenance. My only interest was the trucking jobs, not changing faucet washers or collecting trash, and despite paying pretty well and satisfying my lust for movement, they could only be counted on two or three times a week on average, which gave me plenty of time for more work at other elite, high school dropout professions such as pizza delivery man, pharmacy delivery man, night watchman, and security guard at a couple of the local boardwalk loony bins—anything I could find and get paid for that wouldn't depress me or put me on the *not-worth-it* side of the law.

One of them, *The Promenade*, run by a low-key clan of newly arrived immigrants from eastern Europe who recognized me as a tribesman, was a colossal behemoth, spanning the entire block, boulevard to boulevard, east to west, with six floors and hundreds of rooms, each with its own state “dumped” inhabitant doing the *Thorazine Shuffle*, as creepy as it gets in the deathly silence of the frozen seaside winter night. At irregular intervals, while dozing off to the TV screen, trying to keep awake as I sunk ever-deeper into the warm cushions of the central sofa, an elevator door would suddenly lurch open, and out would shuffle a ghostly pale old man in a withered bathrobe, maybe holding an empty paper cup, maybe murmuring something unintelligible, or a long forgotten and confused-looking now aged chorus girl in a tattered house dress with misapplied face makeup searching for her phantom audience, a cast of tobacco-stained film extras on a Fellini meets George Romero set. They'd wander through the lobby with no obvious intention or destination, oblivious to my presence, before quietly and almost as suddenly fading back into the dimly lit, macabre, and crypt-like Kubrickian hallways off the main floor. On the plus side, it offered me access to the fully stocked industrial kitchen, where, with the generous approval of management, I feasted all season long on half-gallon jars of creamed herring and trays of fresh pound cake washed down by quarts of cold milk, which by springtime contributed the added, unexpected, and unsettling addition of ‘love handles.’ *Huh? What the hell is this?* I wondered at their first disturbing revelation. “*Into each life, a little rain must fall,*” mused the voice.

Anyhow, taking stock, aside from a few unremarkable exceptions like the tape recorder capers, my short-lived burglary career ended disastrously, a felony conviction and a mandated year of confinement at TOPIC House, so that was out, and the shoplifting shenanigans ran their course, having concluded with more of an ignominious whimper than a bang. Robbing the drug dealer went okay; yes, a serious rush, but I smoked the profits; wasn't into retail action, not even reefer; never was much of a merchant; and it was very likely to get me dead, so that career was out. There were a few other morally vacant scams in my trusty bag of tricks, mostly involving impersonation of one sort or another, which I'll maybe get to another time, but for then I was actually trying to make it straight, or as close as practical

given the circumstances, out on a narrow ledge, hand to mouth, and for all intents and purposes, alone and on my own. Just to drive that point home, another surprise was delivered to my mailbox concerning my excommunication. It was a letter from the Nassau County Family Court—a summons. I was being “emancipated.” Papers were filed, and my presence was required in court for an *emancipated minor hearing*. In plain English, Ma’ was having me legally *disowned*. Nice. All that inheritance of nothing, aside from a beautiful Knabe baby grand handed down to me by Mom-Mom and Pop-Pop, was being denied; the entire dynastic fortune of nothing, or next to nothing, or any even possible future something, was gone. And as for right now? Deal with it. Or don’t. Basically, *fuck off*, son. Ma’ and Pa’ kept everything they once had, inherited themselves, continued to have, and might ever have, and sonny-boy was shit out of luck. They paid for lawyers, hospitals, and shrinks, so musta’ figured they were entitled to everything else—a bad-seed son not even a mother could love. That’s me. Now it was official. Anyway, it’s an old story already told.

Despite the past, a rough start, somehow, through necessity, what was lacking in experience was made up for with drive. I even managed to accrue enough legitimate pay stubs to collect Unemployment while hustling cash jobs on the side. So covering the phone bill and rent was never a big deal, keeping me in good standing with the landlord, neighbors, and the property manager, who lived in the same layout studio next door to mine. The landlords, an older, semi-retired Jewish couple who lived upstairs on the top floor of the three-story row of garden apartments, were decent enough folks, giving the twenty-year-old a shot at playing the grown-up with a real apartment and lease in his name. At the first meeting, an answer to a classified, I showed up with Jackhammer Dave. With his presence and validation, a decent impression was formed, and I didn’t want to disappoint them either. Once, the gray-haired, mustachioed old dude told me, “A man like you could make his month’s rent (maybe \$175?) in just one day.” No idea how that might be done; it sounded fantastical, but he was serious in a lighthearted kinda’ way, so the idea stuck. Anyway, I was on my own and having fun, and for me, that’s what Long Beach had always been about: fun and independence. Though always independent, or “emancipated” in the lingo of the day, it wasn’t actually always that much fun. The free-wheeling

fun and youthful seaside frolic were occasionally punctuated and paid for with episodes of true punishing hell.

That next-door neighbor, the property manager, was a gentle, middle-aged, oafish kinda’ red-headed guy, a quiet gentleman with a good heart named Bob. Bob, another bachelor, had to come to my rescue late one blustery, cold winter night when, in one of my regular nighttime drunken fits due to an ever-present, spontaneously ignitable rage with no immediate cause, I suddenly threw a just-emptied bottle of sherry through my own front window. Some kind of crazy impulse, no thought, none at all, just did it; it seemed to just happen, like watching someone else act crazy and being powerless to stop it, so the windswept, chilled air came rushing into the compact, one-room apartment, quickly flooding it with ocean breeze freeze. What to do now but stare in horror and disbelief at the inexplicable, self-inflicted wound until gathering enough of my remaining wits to get up, walk over to his apartment, knock on the door, and ask for his help? “My window broke,” as if it shattered itself. It was about nine or ten pm, way after normal working hours, but he didn’t say a word; no questions even asked, none. He just got up, stepped outside into the frozen air, took a look, grabbed his toolbox, and went to work, right away replacing the shattered glass pane with another from the stock he apparently had stored. 1, 2, 3, like it was routine. Maybe ten minutes’ work in the dark. He never even said a word to me about it later—not about the intrusion, not about the damaged property, and, I assume, not even to the landlord. They never mentioned it either. Quiet Bob was a gentle man with a good heart, and this simple act of kindness, especially in light of my occasional cruelty and usual selfishness, was worth remembering. But that wasn’t the only touch of hell; the image of that shattered glass (*what the fuck did I just do?*), shards and splinters all over my desk and floor (*what is my fuckin’ problem?*), feeling the bitter bite of the now indoor air—it was only a quick taste.

For example, always up for a party, one memorable mid-fall night months earlier, just about ready to sack out on a work night, I heard a boisterous, fun-having crowd gathered just outside my backyard, which was rare; it was usually just the surf, wind, and the occasional gull by this time of year, so I threw on a pair of shorts, sneakers, and a sweatshirt, headed out the studio

back door, climbed up to the boardwalk, and peered over the far edge and down to the sand below to investigate. It was a late end-of-summer beach bash, and as soon as they saw me, invited me to join them and partake, which I immediately jumped down and did. There was a ten-gallon plastic waste bucket filled with sangria, 20 or 30 young guys and chicks, local beach folk, a loud radio playing dance music, and then came the joints. A plastic baggie filled with them was tossed in the air, showering down on us like twig-like sticks of white manna from above. Needless to say, within twenty minutes, I was already wasted. Zonked. Everything was groovy. Life was perfect.

Next thing you know, there's only four of us revelers left, all dudes, stragglers holding out until the last slug was downed and final toké was smoked. By now we were good buddies, laying on our backs, staring stoned up at the stars, music replaced by the steady crashing of the tireless waves, talkin' trash, laughing, whatever, when, along from the eastern beach, strolled two couples about our ages: a big, burly guy with dark hair and an evil grin, pro-football sized; and a much shorter burly guy, but all chest and shoulders with a lighter complexion, and their girls, who, for no apparent reason, just kicks (take a guess), challenged the four of us to a brawl. Strangers in the night, exchanging [hostile] glances, wondering what the chances were that they'd be shedding blood... Okay, buzzed as I was, I stood up to rumble. *4 on 2?* I thought, *fun, let's get it on!* (voice on Drunk and Stupid Overdrive) Just after getting to my feet, I noticed I was alone; my three new mates were still on their butts in the sand and not budging, not even thinking about it as far as I could tell, something I hadn't considered when accepting this ridiculous challenge (what if I was armed? What if I was Bruce Lee?) Well, I wasn't. Too bad. Realizing something was off right away, something serious, I quickly changed my mind and decided to try to finesse my way out of it diplomatically by suggesting to the larger of the two who was closer to me, basically right up on me, and large enough to block the view of almost anything behind him, "*You're a little too big for me.*" Then suddenly, the smaller one, maybe 5' 6-7" and 180 lbs., the broad-shouldered ironworker, too short for hockey, turns out to be a Golden Glover instead, steps out from behind his immense buddy and, with a weird, high-pitched kewpie doll kinda' voice suggests, "*But I'm not!*" And that quick,

not even time to put up my dukes, it's **kaPOW!!!** Hitting me dead-center, square in the mug, with a power that felt like a hand grenade explosion, sending me flying backwards about six feet to the ground, where I landed on my now sobered-up butt but still dazed, with birds chirping, rockets flying, and stars circling, thinking *holy shit—this guy's gonna hit me again* (voice of reason, a bit late to the show). Somehow, after a few seconds, I was able to get up off the sand, only to run-run-back off the beach and around the corner, hop the low cement yard wall, and into my apartment bathroom to check the damage, only to find in the mirror that my formerly proud proboscis was now pointed at my ear, off by about 45 degrees. Remembering the last brawl that broke my schnoz, a few years before at the local train station, and the agony of the post-surgery procedures ("*This is going to feel a little funny,*" the doctor warned before removing the packing cotton, sending me into an orbit of agony that defies description, not "funny" at all), decided *fuck that! I'm going to fix it myself—right now*, so I palmed the wayward *schnozzola* between my two hands and, with a sudden, single, violent, but certain push, forced it back into place. The next morning, two black eyes and a broken nose (though in place, mostly) later, to the distress of Jackhammer, I showed up in sunglasses ready for work, hungover and badly bruised but still on time. *You're only young once*, they say. Thank Olympus. Once like that though, is quite enough.

Wish I could report the blow was taken in stride, y'know, *give some, take some*; I've shattered a few faces too, even some without warning, but that's not what happened. I chose not to. This was, after all, my new home turf, the place I decided to make a real stand, so something had to be done. Naturally, I did what any self-respecting American psychopath would do. A few days later, after making the appropriate inquiries, feelers in the neighborhood, I got the scoop: he was from a local West End rough-neck family, feared and aggressive, his name (*Tony O'Malley*, what else?) and profession as well as the details of his boxing pedigree, then proceeded up the street and down the block to the local gun shop to buy a brand new, never-been-fired before high-powered hunting rifle, a .308 Remington with a cool looking scope, just like De Niro's in the *Deer Hunter*, telling myself that if he ever came around near my habitat again, and gave me what I sought, an open and shut self-defense case (which could be easily choreographed),

I'd use it to make him go away. How far away would be up to the circumstances, but I was setting things up in the meantime, even firing a test shot into the cement wall of the cinderblock lavatory structure built on the sand very near the incident's spot as a warning to anyone who may have witnessed the exercise. Damn thing was a cannon. The release—the explosive energy unleashed by squeezing that trigger—was itself comforting. "*Happiness*", indeed. Challenging him with fists would have likely resulted in the same outcome, maybe worse, so there was no solution that way. Hiring someone would be expensive and cowardly, and everyone rats ("three can keep a secret if two are dead"), like Jimmy D made clear. I never cared much for baseball bat-style assaults, messy and uncertain, though a lingering option in an emergency. The fact was, I was deeply inspired by the De Niro character, "one shot," summed up thusly: "*The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted*" by a famous writer dude named D.H. Lawrence, so buying one was already on the agenda anyway. Loved'm, guns baby, yeah, pistols like James Bond's *P38*, Napoleon Solo's *Mauser*, John Wayne's *Colt 45*, and Dirty Harry's *.357 Magnum*, even Dick Tracey's *.38 Snub Nose*, and machine guns like the *Thompson Sub* the Untouchables carried, slept with them as a small boy, the comforting toys of a frightened child. They protected me from the monsters under my bed and hiding in my closet, and, and, there were other issues to confront and handle, much bigger ones than *Mr. But I'm Not* and the face-shattering blow: issues of historical significance and, in keeping with my ongoing paranoid delusions, contemporary concerns. Permit me to explain.

"Paranoia strikes deep – into your life it will creep – it starts when you're always afraid..." – For What it's Worth, Buffalo Springfield, (1967)

A few years back, not certain when or where, I read Leon Uris's unforgettable *Mila 18*, the tragic saga of the doomed uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto during the Second World War, led by Mordechai Anielewicz and Tzivia Lubrkin and their heroic company of desperate shopkeepers, artists,

and school teachers turned warriors. As a Jewish kid being taught about the *Holocaust*, an indelible impression is made on the psyche that forever shapes the world view: living as a *marked man*, "a Jew," hated by strangers, lied about, slandered, brutalized, condemned to death along with all of your friends, family, and people for the unforgivable sin of existing, the eternal scapegoat, and knowing that at any time, under just the wrong circumstances, history might seek to repeat itself, as if it's always on the cusp. This time, though, aside from having an armed and lethal state to back us up and deter or punish our tormentors, there would be precedent for such an unspeakable, hitherto unfathomable atrocity: the comprehensively organized, highly industrialized, deliberate campaign of mass murder, a war on unarmed civilians, from the elderly to newborns, so we, the survivors and torch bearers of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, would not be taken by surprise or lulled into any false sense of security again. For sure, I wouldn't be. They weren't "work camps" the cattle cars led to; they were *death factories whose product was corpses*, so when they come for you, it's already too late, but don't go. Fight it out right there, to the death, bringing as many of them down with you as the Creator permits. The old saying goes, "*A Jew always sleeps with one bag packed.*" To that, I'd add, "*and one round already chambered.*" I may have taken that a bit far at times, the preparations, but if so, I wouldn't be the first and wouldn't be without cause, however much exaggerated. Thus, another dormant, now activated purpose for the acquisition. "*Happiness*," as we're reminded by the musical *Titans of Liverpool*, "*is a warm gun. Yes, it is.*" Comfort. Yes it is. Psychic comfort. Even a cold one makes me feel better, so long as it's in the right hands, mine. And the ammo my canon used? The bullets? They were nearly as big as my fist and menacing just to look at. The thing could drop an eight-hundred-pound bear at a hundred yards in *one shot*, so she was more than up to the task. Anyway, back to the main point: resistance as an existential imperative.

At the same time, just before the *But I'm Not* encounter, I got the inspired idea of driving an ambulance from watching the film *Mother, Jugs, and Speed*. And Raquel Welch? Man, oh man, she's an inspiration on a whole 'nother level all on her own, so I got involved with the local volunteer fire department, where I took the EMT course but failed the test. Anyway, I was

still able to find another part-time job working for a nearby private company driving their ambulettes as a step in that direction, and you could take the course and test again and again, so there was no reason to give up. This brought me into close contact with a lot of guys in uniform who drove large vehicles, mostly emergency ones with radios, and flashed a lot of lights. One night, during my usual near-comatose binge of drunkenness, just before shutting my eyes, the local volunteer fire department was conducting some type of drill right outside my apartment: spinning lights, crackling radios, and the movement of men with a purpose. In my lizard-brained intoxication, I imagined that American Nazis had secretly infiltrated the fire department and that this was really a rehearsal, a trial run, practice, or the actual event of rounding up the local Jews. On the one hand, I knew this was paranoid fantasy, but on the other hand, it seemed like if it were true, this was very much what it might look like, and it just might be the real thing, but if they were drilling, well, then, so should I. That meant taking my rifle down off the wall mount where it was displayed, just above my bed, in arm's reach, chambering a round, three or four more in the magazine, and sitting with it on my lap, barrel pointed to the door, thinking, if they come for me, I'll greet them like this: *KaPOW! Ch-chit, kaPOW! Ch-chit, kaPOW!* "One little, two little, three little [dead] Indians..." All I can say is thank Apollo no one knocked on my door that night, so there wasn't any immediate problem beyond what already existed—the deranged voice interpreting life and giving me instructions. So, armed or otherwise, my mind was still the essential breeding ground for catastrophe, and that was only going to deepen and grow over time. Yet, delusional paranoia expressed in dark fantasy has roots somewhere, and tragically, in times like this one, in historic reality.

Ah, love and death.

Eros and Thanatos, Long Beach, and *America's Healthiest City*. Too good to be true, and it wasn't. The thing about boozing to oblivion is, for some, only about the health issues (body and mind), absences from work, dangerous driving, the loss of income, and any filters that might ordinarily

help guard what comes out of your mouth. But for others? Like me, it's a lot darker than that. Serious consequences. It's the blackout, or grayout, where you do something, like at Impala, so terrifying that you can't rationalize it away or point fingers, and worse, you can't forget it or do anything to prevent the next one, which you already know is coming and probably sooner rather than later. This next incident is really ugly, but to leave it out would defeat the essential purpose of the exercise: getting it all down, even the ugly, cowardly, and cruel, as much as the shame can be overcome, so it's left behind as a testament to a life lived, whatever it may or may not be worth, this man's life, the author's tale, otherwise it might as well never have been lived, a pointless waste of creative energy, e.g., like in 1984, where *the Party* destroys any record of your ever having existed before executing you, e.g., utter and total, literal and irrevocable obliteration, a meaningless nonevent.

A year or two before, Denise was in TOPIC House (see *Kabbo: Volume I*) with me for a while, but only for a few months. For exactly what reason, I never knew. Maybe she thought she had a problem a TC ("therapeutic community") could help her with; it wasn't obvious, like court-mandated or on death's door. Maybe other people thought so and made the decision for her. We never really spoke back then, because I was obsessed with Jennifer Blom, her pal and my then *objet d'amour*, but we recognized each other right away that warm and sunny fall afternoon when, by chance, we met up on the boardwalk and began a nearly spontaneous romantic adventure. She wasn't quite Jaclyn Smith or Farrah Fawcett, certainly not Miss Blom, but she lived in Long Beach and was pure female, cute enough with an Anglo-Irish pixie face, a medium-brown, full head of thick seventies hair, warm brown "fuck me" eyes, a tiny turned-up nose, a kinda' square jaw, a strong chin, and most importantly, all the right size and shape body parts. And that meant, combined with whatever she needed and saw in me, made us both want to give it a go, and go we did, clicking much more favorably between the sheets than I ever imagined back at the Mitchel Field trailer park. She even handed me a delightful intimate surprise, which I won't describe, but it was quite hot, really, so it was definitely going to continue until it definitely was not.

Here's the scoop; the easy part: One night, possibly after our second or third go-round, she invited me to a couple's party with her building superintendent and his wife in their ground-floor garden apartment in the east end of Long Beach. Debauchery Bacchus-style would ensue in their slightly more sedentary neighborhood than mine. The east had fewer bars, fewer looney house hotels, more families, the high school, high-rises on Shore Road, more synagogues, and whiter collars than my neighborhood, which was more central but closer to the notoriously wild west end and had a lot more singles and working-class minorities, primarily Latinos, than the other neighborhoods of this slightly run-down and slightly rugged ghost-bait beach town.

The booze and conversation were flowing. I'd never met the other couple before, but we all seemed to be hitting it off well enough, enjoying the same music, sharing weed and tales of hedonism and misadventures. Eventually, deep into the night, through the auditory mist of drunkenness and laughter, I heard my date refer to her date as "a Jew," as if the subject of ethnicity suddenly became topical and keenly relevant; again, as if my entire being could be summarized to that single syllable of questionable meaning. I couldn't tell whether it was specifically derogatory or not, but it's seldom flattering when used as either an adjective or as a verb: "He's a Jew," or "don't Jew me," and it wasn't as though we were talking about religious beliefs or taking a demographic census. No, this was not a discussion on comparative theology or a philosophical inquiry. No, it's more like *in vino veritas*, a label used to assign the well-known canards that arose from centuries of medieval superstitions backed up by barbaric and primitive bigotry. A Jew, as in *cheap, cowardly, dishonest, traitorous Christ-killers and well-poisoners*; Shylock; the entire ugly range of horns and tails; the designated uber-villain; the font of all evil; and the essential, eternal other; rarely, if ever, implying virtues such as: *kind, funny, trustworthy, creative, compassionate, industrious, charitable, brave, strong, or honorable*. I couldn't make out exactly what they were saying, drunk as I was, but I kept on hearing it, not once or twice but again and again, it seemed, and though I was way too *shitfaced* to speak up, I was still feeling it, a growing rage at this unearned betrayal and humiliation. The conversation no longer seemed

to include me but rather had become about me, the Jew. *Okay, thanks, honey; I got it. We'll see.*

Now for the hard part: Later that night, still with our hosts, after they retired to their bedroom, we went at it again—the wild thing, nature's definitive call, right on their living room floor, without letting on a hint of anger; in fact, I tried to repress it (*why let it get in the way of a good lay?*), playing along as if everything was exactly like before she triggered the demon, until just the right, terribly wrong moment. How to put this decently? Just as I entered her, "missionary" style, and just after a few gentle thrusts, she began to moan with pleasure, me looking down at her, supporting myself with my left hand freeing my right, I suddenly slapped her across the face. This was not playful or kinky in some way; this was punishment. Opening her eyes, she looked up at me with a mixture of surprise, a bit of hurt, and confusion. Not my desired response, so, still in her, slapped her again, this time about twice as hard. Thus I saw what I sought: *fear*, courtesy the "Jew." But the fear was shared; I felt it too, having seemingly lost complete control of my actions. I don't remember deciding or even intending to do this until a few split seconds before it happened, as if it happened on autopilot—the empty bottle thrown through my window, the dark and dangerous voice taking a silent command, watching it all happen as if only a spectator. Just then, a shred of sanity emerged, or maybe it was the *id* under *the voice* telling me to *quickly get out*, if not of town, then definitely of the scene. *Get out. Point made. Go back home. Hide, and maybe they won't seek.* She may have cried out, alerting the super and his wife, but by the time they came out of their bedroom and into the living room to investigate, I was already more than half-dressed and headed towards the door. There was no physical evidence of injury, nor was there any conversation—not a word; silence. It seemed to them perhaps like a lover's spat, but it wasn't that at all; it was a touch of murderous rage slipping out through the cracks of my unfiltered ego, set off by her words of insult, betrayal, and disrespect. Before that, I was kind to her, even warm and charitable, but from my dark and violent core, alcohol's best friend and running partner, I responded. Vengeance served hot. I just left; no cops were called, and no one tried to question or stop me. *Get out of here. Go home.* Once there, stumbling my way the mile

or so west, I locked the door, pulled down the shades, and drifted into a dark and dreamless sleep.

"Maybe then I'll fade away and not have to face the facts - it's not easy facin' up when your whole world is black." – Paint it Black, Mick Jagger, Keith Richards (1966)

The next morning, the apartment still quite dark, shades drawn tight, and lights out, immediately confronted by the memory of the horror of the preceding night, I prayed for something—for exactly *what* I didn't know. I just prayed in fear, real fear. *What did I do this time?* I was adrift without a life jacket, drowning. She had a big brother in town with a rep, one of the local two-fisted barbarians. He would rightly be after me, so not only did I lose a lover, but now I was faced with losing a lot more. He would pound me into a bloody carcass. But this was Long Beach, again, the place chosen to make my stand, so I couldn't run, wouldn't run. I was staying put, despite the fact that I didn't even have any real friends there or any of my own residual rep from the Rock to bolster me or fall back on. Here I wasn't *Kabbo*; here I was nobody special, so instead I'd have to prove myself all over again and deal with my growing craziness on my own the best I could, and so far? Despite being on time with the rent and quitting the shoplifting racket, not so good. In a quiet desperation, I called a local flower shop and, knowing where she worked, had them deliver flowers—the clichéd dozen roses with a dictated apology note—and her brother? Well, I'd have to get to him first if there was any chance of surviving his wrath; I wasn't gonna live in a defensive alert state for the rest of my days, or until that inevitable day of reckoning. Either way, after only a quick couple of months Long Beach was rapidly degrading from *America's Healthiest City*, my refuge and intended sanctuary, to a world of shit and the location of my likely early demise, perhaps ending up as another body buried under the boardwalk with its own ghost hovering above it. Already constantly watching my back, now I was on the lookout for a second local roughneck, and the shit was getting thicker and higher all the time. Soon it would engulf me, choking me in my own excrement. *Good morning, Rob. This is your doom.* The scene became an all-too-regular event: the boozing into catastrophe, the morning

after, the fear, remorse, and desperation. How long could my "luck" hold out? Odds heavily favored that sooner rather than later I'd pull a stunt there'd be no recovery from, again, that line. *I (barely) Walk(ed) the Line.* Yup, a stunt whose consequences not even Jimmy D or Jackhammer Dave would be able to save me from—a line beyond mortality. You could see where it was headed. Anyone spending more than five minutes with me could sense it—if not the final point, then definitely the direction. Subtlety was not among my virtues, more like a *"live fast, die young, and leave a pretty corpse"* kinda' guy. Subtle, like monogamy, was never even on the menu—unless it was subtle, like a sudden slap in the face.

Chapter III: *USS MC Fox DD-829*

"In the navy, you can sail the seven seas..." – In The Navy, The Village People, Morali Jacques, Belolo Henri (1979)

Regardless of religious convictions or lack thereof, something or Someone must have heard my prayers; there's not much else to conclude aside from the randomness of limitless possibility. Opening the front door a crack and limiting the inflow of daylight to a minimum, just wide enough for my arm to reach outside into the mailbox, I found a letter forwarded to me by my ma', the great emancipator, from the commander at the local naval base in Brooklyn, Floyd Bennett Field, who had something relevant and timely to say. *What the hell could they want? Wasn't my Navy adventure over? Wasn't I discharged and sent home, or at least given the money to buy a ticket home, months ago back in San Diego? Didn't it end like all the other fiascos that made up the bulk of my marginal existence up until then?* I could hardly imagine what was inside and hesitated to open it. Seldom did good news come in the mail, and my morning was off to a very dark start, "painted black," but curiosity got the better of me and, as desperate as I was for relief, thought at least today's dark-matter subject might be changed, and man, oh man, was that the fact. The letter was addressed to me, Seaman Recruit Robert Israel Kabakoff; it had my address and Social Security number right, so it must be me. The official United States Navy Reserve document politely informed me that I was about a half step to AWOL, that I had been ordered to report there for duty (*huh? when? by whom?*) and that my presence was hereby required forthwith, so it was a summons to report for duty ASAP. Unbelievable. And finally, it concluded, if I had any questions, to call the base, and provided a number. My first reaction was the sane one, call them up, explain the error, and get out of it again. That's what the good angel on my shoulder told me to do, but just as I reached for the phone, guess what? The fallen angel, the dependably dominant voice, jumped up on the other shoulder and said, *"Put the phone down. Don't be a schmuck. You always wanted to be a sailor, right? Well,*

you've been given another chance. You still have that military ID card you swiped off the desk back in Nimitz and still carry it in your wallet. Right? (Kabbo: Volume I) That's what it's for, that's why you musta' snatched it. With that in hand and this letter, you'll pass as an ordinary, run-of-the-mill fuckup and fit right in. Go to the base, buy the uniform, and play like you're just going along with what you're being told. Now maybe you'll have your chance to get out to sea. Show up, and for just this once keep your mouth shut, sailor."

Wow. That *did* change the subject; a reprieve from Mount Olympus, just in my darkest hour in a pit of despair, a ray of unexpected light. Aye, aye, *Captain! Attention on deck*. Now I suddenly had another adventure to go on, and that's what I was gonna do: ride the crest of this wave for as long and as far as I could. So I called my ol' pal *Horsehead* instead, told him we needed to make a trip in his car to the base, and filled him in on the rest of the details as we rode. He just smirked silently as he drove, fully aware of my usual *chutzpah* and relishing the prospect of witnessing me pull this one off. To where and to what end was anybody's guess, but that's what pals are for. Witnesses. Not judges. The base was about forty-five minutes from my studio, and once we arrived at the gate, we were easily able to get on by flashing the ID card. No questions asked. First up, we headed straight to PX, where I bought all the wardrobe necessary for the surprise revival of my aborted navy career, beginning with the old-fashioned but still regulation Cracker Jack sailor suit, which just so happened to fit me perfectly as if it had been custom-made and looked great; the black, wool watch cap, the belt, boots, and jeans, everything you needed to dress the role of a sea-worthy *sailor-man*. The only required item missing that day from the stock was the regulation white sailor cap to go with the navy blue Cracker Jacks outfit, but they had a knockoff that looked to me and most others exactly the same, so I bought that one too and continued along the charted course, full steam ahead. It's doubtful I ever gave Denise another thought after that—water under the bridge, pardon the pun. It began to look as if I was actually going to get out to the fleet and play with real toys as props and real locations as scenery, which, except for the brother, pretty much put that nightmare out of my head. Faith restored. The seas parted, and, with that

letter as my ticket, I was headed to the sea-faring *Promised Land* via a voyage to *Fantasy Island*.

Turns out, by way of explanation, there's a big difference between the US Navy and the US Navy Reserve. Apparently, they are two totally different departments and bureaucracies. Since enlisting in the Reserve, committed to a short time of active duty, mostly basic, followed by six years of reserve duty, and was only technically discharged from the actual, active, full-time navy, something like that, where they happen to hold basic training for both branches, so the discharge only applied to that navy, the regular one. I was still on the books for the Reserve Navy. At least that's what I could piece together, and since I never intended to say anything and no one was ever likely to ask, it just wasn't going to come up, at least not without a specific reason, which I had no intention of providing, as in asking for a specific security clearance or getting thrown in the brig. Such a weird and irregular set of circumstances rarely occurs, if ever.

Next, less than a week later, as expected, I was in fact assigned to the fleet, a ship, an older World War II-commissioned destroyer conveniently ported permanently at the legendary Brooklyn Navy Yard, for which I was assigned a billet and told exactly when and exactly where to report. It would be monthly drills, weekends at sea, where we reservists, or *weekend warriors*, as the regulars called us, would practice operations with the full-time backbone crew for what destroyers are tasked with: fighting wars at sea, specifically guarding bigger ships such as aircraft carriers and supply ships from enemy attack, like deadly sea-faring, fully armed bodyguards. I was psyched. This was cool. So psyched that after only a few drills, I designed and bought a customized high school varsity jacket, like the frat boys in my hometown wore, their 'colors' with the frat names stitched on the back, for example, Alpha Sigma Phi, but in place of Greek letters I had the name of the ship, the *USS M. C. Fox*, as the upper 'rocker' and centered horizontally beneath as the lower 'rocker' the call letters, DD-829. The *D* standing for *destroyer* made it pure badass, and wearing it felt great, like finally finding a team to play on even if I wasn't actually supposed to be on it, not even on the bench, but there I was, showing up for 'muster' and on time, month after month, standing watches, chipping paint, at the helm, and even in the gun

mounts during general quarters, better known as *battle stations*, and getting a monthly check for the time spent on the drills! Rush upon rush. All that on top of going out with the shipmate boys during liberty to convene my regular routine, getting drunk, and into bar fights. The life of the party, that was ol' E1, Seaman Recruit Kabakoff, a reputation quickly established and a personal legacy maintained.

Better living through Long Beach Chemist

Meanwhile, between Long Beach and the Rock, life was supported by the dynamic hustle of a roster of part-time jobs. On average, two, three, or even four at a time, if you count whatever came up *ad hoc* that someone might hire me for, like repairing their brick front steps. Masonry was another profession I was ill-suited to. It was fun, yeah, but too sedentary. Between them all and the ongoing full-time hunt for babes, the semi-regular bar brawls and *ad hoc* fistfights, capped off by nightly booze and weed binges into oblivion, taken all together as a full-time program, kept me pretty busy. There was a major pharmacy in town that supplied most, if not all, of the medication to the hundreds or more local cuckoo house residents, and they needed daily delivery. Driving was always a pleasure. I loved the movement, like a dog sticking its head out the window of a moving car to catch the breeze and watch the images flying by, so I was always looking for work where I could turn a key, step on a gas pedal, and zoom away, making tracks. Outdoor work, rarely ever inside, felt suffocating; an exception was night watchman work at the crazy-house hotels, which also allowed me to fit in some half-sleep and feast on the previously mentioned free food, so it had its advantages. Driving, though? That was it. If not a truck, a car, a bike, a motorcycle, even a skateboard, anything with wheels. Even a single wheel will do; unicycles were fun too, like a circus act, but obviously not suited to longer distances or making any types of deliveries. Anyway, it was motion I craved, and I was pretty good at it too, having a real feel for the wheel and could get from point A to point B and then onto point C pretty quickly and efficiently, and generally speaking, without even breaking too many traffic laws, respecting speed limits (more or less but

mostly more), always signaling lane changes, and stopping for the red ones, lights, and stop signs; yellow was a judgment call (speed up or slow down?) that I almost always got right. The rules were part of the game. Cheating was for losers who couldn't handle the challenge of restraint and still get it done, so, unless extraordinary circumstances warranted the added risk of breaking them, so be it.

Of course, even a serious driver needs to be flexible with the rules of the road, like the time I was being chased by a very angry, very big guy after accidentally backing up into his car and maybe cracking his grill or a headlight, but rather than stopping, getting out, and fixing things up, once we made eye contact through the rearview mirror, for some mysterious reason, I gave him the finger instead before speeding away, which, I dunno, just seemed like the fun thing to do. Yup, it happened, stone cold sober too, in a banged-up borrowed jalopy with a torn floorboard like the Flintstones', loaned to me for a summer afternoon beer run from the beach by another *loose-at-the-seams* beachcomber dude. Never a dull moment in my world. Racing away from the enraged motorist, heading west on Park Avenue, the main commercial drag, I sped through light after light, figuring he'd slow down and not take the risk, but he didn't slow down and, furious, stayed relentlessly close on my tail, apparently just as *loose-at-the-seams* as the rest of my world and the wrong chap to dismiss so vulgarly, adding insult to injury as I had. After about three lights, a LBPd radio car spotted me and pulled me over. The cop, a black guy, probably the only one on the force, recognized me from my routine pizza delivery runs and saved me from the big guy's wrath or slamming into something immovable or moving but quite heavy, like another vehicle or, Zeus help us, a pedestrian. He didn't even write me a ticket; he just pulled me over and eyeballed the wider scene, who I was fleeing from, claiming I had no idea who or why, and the still-enraged big guy just kept going, and that was that, at least for then. But the eye contact, though brief, was penetrating, and neither of us would likely forget the face of the other.

My chance to make fast tracks and get the jobs done came when I got hired on by that busy pharmacy as one of the two drivers they needed to make those important runs, back and forth, all day long, six, maybe seven days a

week. One driver handles the east, the other the west, with Long Beach Chemist positioned centrally on Park Avenue. It was really quite an impressive operation: a rather large storefront, twice the square footage of the average retail business establishment on the strip; always action, nonstop; and along with the medications sold the usual consumer fare drugstores offer: shampoos and throat lozenges, greeting cards and first aid items, etc. Set up deep in the rear, way in the back, but facing the front, was a low-standing, two-tier stage, each with its own narrow lane; both levels the workspace for three or four full-time pharmacists filling prescriptions all day long, standing upright, counting pills, and mixing drugs. All the action was visible to the public, so it became sort of a performance space, with a low-key cashier, usually a hot young chick, taking it in while watching out for shoplifters. If need be, the PD would respond in less than two or three minutes; it was that central, and the cops, as I said, were a local force, so it was secured. Drug store robberies are usually break-ins anyway, and for that, they probably had state-of-the-art alarms. I never checked. Anyway, *Horsehead* wanted the job as the other driver and asked me once, in an uncharacteristically quiet and serious tone, "See what you can do." Well, as soon as a spot opened (there was a regular turnover of drivers, usually part-time college kids and assorted local misfits), I made the requested move. This was no one's career, not even old man Seymour's, the man-child relief driver for Sundays, so I alerted *Horse* and recommended him; that's what I could do, and in no time flat, we were partnered up for a short term as the chemist's dependable team of regular delivery men.

The full-time pharmacists, though? These bright guys were chronic underachievers who probably didn't have the patience or funding for medical school, so they settled for this far less prestigious and rewarding career, and their attitudes plainly reflected that: dissatisfaction with life at a relatively young age, most in their thirties, a frustration that expressed itself in a constant stream of witless sarcasm, usually evenly distributed, targeted ridicule to which almost all were routinely subjected. Here, from their spots on stage, they had an audience, customers as well as each other, and now they had *Horsehead* among them, who, as a committed underachiever himself, gave as well as he got. You couldn't ask them anything or make a comment without getting a snide, insulting response that aimed for pointed

satire but rarely hit the mark, more often than not falling flat as adolescent schoolyard mockery, more pathetic than funny. Even though they got a kick out of it and it was mostly in play and not particularly vicious or caustic, it appeared to be the much-needed way for them to vent their collective frustration with professional mediocrity. They'd be on him about what a smart young guy like him was doing in a menial job like this when he'd be better off using his many and obvious talents as a fighter pilot or, failing that, perhaps a professional crash test dummy, and he'd quickly find their weaknesses, usually physical and easy to spot: skinny, balding, overweight, bad skin, anything, and exaggerate their idiosyncratic mannerisms, involuntary twitches, or unnecessary Rodney Dangerfield-type of repeated shrugs in the return fire of their flat jokes. I honestly thought that was why he wanted the job—a sort of kindred spirit with those B-level practitioners turned vaudeville clowns. In fact, that's what he called the whole tiered arrangement of stooges, "*a cascading circus of cavorting clowns.*" A memorable phrase and, in my view, not a bad description. Their attempt at humor was a poor imitation of Borscht Belt Jewish; even the gentiles among them gave it a *go*—that kind of sarcasm, like a cast of Grossinger's never-made-it standup comedians mixing drugs as they joked: Buddy Hackett, Sid Caesar, and Don Rickles wannabes. If you confirmed it was Tuesday, they'd say, "*Yeah, all day, followed by Wednesday, every week, a repeating sequence of seven. Don't worry. You'll get it. We're here to help.*" *Horsehead*, carrying a carton of packaged pills, would respond by sucking in his cheeks and making fish lips, imitating the voice, "*Good one, Joel,*" then darting away like a scared guppy. Before leaving the building, he'd set the bundle down, look back to purse his lips again, now adding a Woody Woodpecker-style laugh, hands at his neck flapping like gills, then recover the package and exit to make the run, the laughter continuing unabated until he drifted out of range.

Then there was Captain Jack Rosen, the floor manager, who reminded me of an overgrown beaver with an attitude. Though essentially harmless, he was the worst. Not only was he conceited, but he was never, ever funny. Not once, though he thought he was, which itself was pretty funny, laughing at his own attempts at derisive satire. Jack, with a bit of an overbite, was some kinda' volunteer coast guard guy, had his own boat, and wore his

skipper's cap all the time to remind everyone he wasn't just a local pharmacist but also an important, seafaring boat captain, helping to secure the vast Long Beach shores. No one was in the least impressed. Instead, it was an obviously pathetic attempt at suggesting *gravitas*, or cool, but it only served as more material for ridicule: a short guy in his forties with a semi-permanent sarcastic grin, at odd intervals extending his lower lip to match the overbite, resulting in a slight scowl, like in deep thought about something only he saw, I suppose, and steadily shifting narrow eyes, constantly on the lookout for signs of approval. Maybe someone laughed, or at least snickered, at one of his poorly conceived quips. He was already mocking you before you even said anything to him, so he deserved all the derisive return fire he got. *"Yep, that's right, you're driving east today; east is east and west is west; say it slowly and repeat it as often as needed; this way you'll know which way to aim the car. If you get mixed up, write it down and tape it to your forehead so when you look in the rear-view mirror you can also check your notes, and maybe Mr. Silva will buy you a compass for Christmas if you don't screw up too many orders this week. As a bonus, I may even show you how it works. Magnets are so magical."* Chuckle, chuckle, nice and slow, grinning in self-satisfied amusement the whole time. That type of jerk. *Horse* would make a face like his and grin, loudly sucking his lower lip through his teeth, and reply with perfect deadpan, *"Aye aye Admiral sir, StarFleet Commando East, anchors away and full speed ahead,"* and salute in only slightly exaggerated obedience, before which Captain Jack would have already turned away, ignoring the response, moving quickly on to the next task or easy subordinate target for a juvenile dig. He had a busy operation to run, which was a fact, and despite his goofiness, he handled it, kept on top of all the moving parts, yet was barely, if ever, and even when, only grudgingly acknowledged. No one got any respect there. Well, almost no one.

The owner, on the other hand, Mr. Jerry Silva? The big boss? The complete opposite. It was his operation, also a pharmacist by trade in his early fifties, a sharp-looking, well-dressed cat, another blazer and turtleneck type, with just enough gray in his sideburns complimenting his combed straight back dark hair to give him both the mature and hip look of a successful man at the top of his form, driving a silver steel Mercedes convertible sports car

with "Rex Rx" license plates. The man built the business up from scratch largely by himself to the point when, after about ten or so years of hard work, talent, and dedication, had the legal drug market in Long Beach, and in fact, the whole island from Point Lookout to Silver Point pretty well sewn up. There were a couple of smaller drugstores on the narrow barrier island, so no claims of an unfair monopoly could be made. He covered that, but they were minimal in scope, size, or volume compared with his operation. Jerry Silva wasn't sarcastic; he didn't need to be. Instead, he was cool, confident, relaxed, and almost friendly, always cordial, even under stress, even to us low-man drivers. But he was rarely around. He had Captain Jack the seafarer keeping watch, who spared his boss the relentless sarcasm. With Mr. Silva, he played it straight during his forty-plus hour work week, sometimes up to sixty, so the boss was usually off somewhere else, probably a country club golf green or a city penthouse where he was amused by a harem of nubile and eager-to-please mistresses of every race, style, type, and imaginable specialty, we imagined. But whenever he was there, it was usually just a quick pit stop, a brief word with Jack, and out again, his ride securely double-parked right outside the front entrance. He mighta' even been a straight-up family man, possibly as square as he looked cool, we really didn't know, and it didn't matter. In his own league, he kept his outside life to himself, so it wasn't easy to get a bead on him. No one really tried to either, or at least I never did. He was the big boss, that's all, but that was the impression I got—an accomplished man and a suave playboy to the hilt. And so we rolled at Long Beach Chemist, making our regular stops at the decaying boardwalk loony bins, flirting with the cuter nurses and housekeepers, tolerating the smells of moldy beach wood and stained carpets, collecting meager tips, moving right along, always in motion, until a few weeks later, on the day of finding out why *Horsehead* really wanted the job.

Despite the fact that most of the deliveries went to the fine, elite (you had to be certified coo-coo), classy establishments on the boardwalk described earlier, where they were received by staff who never tipped, rather than the patients, who probably wouldn't have either, we still managed to collect a daily trickle of chump change. This came mostly as tips from relatives of patients in private homes taking in the meds, which we'd pool together at

the end of the shift, then make our daily grocery and liquor store runs. After the gathering expedition, the hunters would bring the daily bread back to the studio and have themselves a fresh nightly feast. The menu was usually some kind of stew, which meant pretty much anything we could throw into a pot and make hot and sop up with loaves of fresh bakery bread and butter. No one was on any kind of diet or counting calories, nothing like that. Rather, it was an “eat, drink, and, when possible, be merry” approach to life. With little or no responsibility at that age and entirely on my own, why not? Wine and weed together, of course, helped with the merry part. Music too, always music: Eric Clapton’s *The Core*, The Beach Boys’ *Surf’s Up*, and Elvis Costello’s *Red Shoes*, with a little Springsteen’s *Spirits in the Night* to lighten life up and round things out.

One mid-fall day, during such a cornucopia’s feast, there was a sudden knock on my front door, and *surprise, surprise*, I don’t know how he found me; perhaps his special forces recon training, but it was Swiss Tom standing there with his usual big smile, enjoying my pleased and amused reaction. The bushy-haired, wild-eyed, and ever-smiling doctor’s son from Impala, undeterred by my early excommunication, enjoyed my ability to laugh at life, including myself, and came to say “hello, Rob.” Turns out the crazed European decided to stay in the *land of the free and the home of the brave*, legally or not, so for some mysterious reason he blew off his visa expiration date, a foolish move, unless there was some kind of overriding reason, which I never asked about and he never volunteered. In his case, I believe it was basically impulsive behavior and a slight case of the always imaginative self-destructive streak so common among the circles I traveled, or perhaps he had warrants somewhere, such as back home or enemies he wanted to avoid. Maybe he was AWOL. Now, though, he was definitely an outlaw of sorts, a trespasser in a foreign land. Despite that, none of us were employed as immigration officers, so a third member joined our “eating club,” as Horse succinctly labeled it. Others would follow: bachelors out on their own; a local Latino guy, Ricky Rivera, with a Jewish girlfriend back in the Rock, who looked like a young Cesar Romero, a knockaround dude I knew from the Boardwalk who sold weed and did “scores” (set-up truck hijackings, no violence); and maybe another occasional school friend or two also from back in the Rock, all solo hunters and gatherers who found one

another and shared resources. Even if we just kicked in two or three dollars apiece, there’d be enough chow for us all to be fully fed, followed by smoke and fire, i.e., weed and booze for dessert.

Aside from his talent for wisecracks and recon, Tom could also cook a little, which added much-needed variety to our previously very limited menu of chicken, buttered bread, onion, and tomato. On a grocery run, “Rob,” he would say, “*perhaps ve make zumzing?*” and point to some exotic vegetables, like radishes, mushrooms, or scallions; or aside the usual Tabasco, salt, pepper, and ketchup seasonings we knew, he’d suggest spices we’d barely ever heard of, exotic stuff to us like *garlic* or *cayenne*; or a new technique to try, like stir frying. His additions were always a plus. Whatever his broader life plan was, he kept it to himself, and we never bothered to explore. It was his business, and, regardless of such existential considerations, he was a welcomed guest, visitor, and friend who needed a place to sleep for a few nights while he found his way.



“Catholic girls start *much too late*.” Not this one. She was right on time.

The furnished studio had one of those high-risers that rested one bed on top of another tucked under the first, which could be slid out and lifted to the same height as the top bed, then locked in alongside, from a single twin to an almost full-sized king, then dropped back down and slid back under for storage. So I had a male guest—a rarity—for a few nights until he found a lady, he said, and that was pretty much that. He probably found dining and then sleeping with her a bit more to his liking, quite understandably, but he never brought her around, so after a few nights, he disappeared as suddenly as he arrived. Or he may have been a gay blade who, once he realized it wasn't happening, lost interest. He did something weird with Vaseline that I won't describe, but he did it casually, just standing there in front of me, like, *who cares?* Okay, I'll tell you. With his back turned to me, naked from the waist down, half his hand disappeared up his ass as though he was looking for something real important up there. Maybe he was looking for a reaction he didn't get from me, so he and his hunting and gathering expedition moved on. Maybe he makes *zumzing mit sumvun* else.

Anyway, on the subject of "scoring" ladies, for me too, with all the inexorable determination of a tidal wave, it was a full-time and, dare I say at risk of deliberate braggadocio, frequently fruitful endeavor, even more satisfying than pleasing Jimmy D or Jackhammer, putting my whole heart into it, all the way, and everything else that opportunity provides. Among my many "scores" were Stephanie the carnal carnivore, the cashier from the corner deli, who I couldn't keep off me, so I joined her in the kama sutra-like antic known as '69'; chunky Taryn with the crazy steel support bra; Veronica the crazy blond who climbed into my studio one night through an unlocked window and surprised me when I opened the door and found her already naked in my bed; the big-boobed, quiet, skinny, blond Lisa that lived in one of those forlorn mansion on an near-abandoned lot by the shore; Leeanne the buttercup, of course, and later one of her shapely friends on the sly, a one-and-done; Chicky "D" as she called herself, the little just sprung-from-reform-school Latina; big Mary who squirted like Old Faithful, half scaring me out of my wits; just right Cheryl right off the beach; pretty Catholic school-girl Maryanne, whose beautiful first cousin I wanted even more but never got, and, of course, underage Wendy, what a knock-out she was at fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen, for her though I had to wait too many years.

Even with all these names and faces and memorable details, some of the more graphic details are better left unsaid. Sadly, though, I still can't remember them all. I wish I could, but Long Beach, which I definitely do remember, was my most fertile hunting ground and was, in any season, always very hot. "America's Healthiest City," so in that sense, okay. Fine. Right. It was.

One of my preferred scoring methods was to spot a likely prospect up on the boardwalk, say, by the centrally located three- or four-unit snack and booze zone, *Seymour's* hotdogs, beer, hamburger, or pizza joint, getting something to drink or an ice cream from the place next door, but not approach her, instead following her with my eyes from my basically fixed position by the rails on the edge as she descended down the ramp back to the sand, keeping my eyes on her as she made her way to whatever blanket or beach towel she positioned for herself, even if I had to move along the edge to keep her in sight, always undetected, like young *Vito* stalking *Don Funucci*. The idea was to follow along carefully, especially through the crowd, looking to see who she was with—a boyfriend, another girl, a mixed group, or if she was with anyone at all. But if she was alone (hopefully), or maybe even with just another chick or two? That marked the beginning of step two. I'd stroll down the ramp and onto the sand, heading straight for her vicinity to make my sudden appearance seem completely spontaneous; maybe I'd ask her for a light or make a comment about the water, or to see if she had a sense of humor, tell her, deadpan, that I was a city lifeguard inspector who needed to see her demonstrate her breaststroke technique, right there on the blanket, before being permitted back in the water, that it was a random test the city required of beachgoers, an insurance thing, and keep a straight face until one of us, usually her, starts laughing as she gradually catches on to my goof by the increasingly absurd requests, stretching them more and more while keeping deadpan dry, like asking her how many different backstrokes she knew and could demonstrate, how long she could hold her breath while treading water at night, in a rainstorm, on acid, and then suddenly change the subject by asking "*okay, but can you knit? How many stitches per minute?*" That was a great icebreaker and almost always worked. If she got angry or didn't laugh, well, probably not; forget it. No fun, even if she was super hot, unless, of

course, she was willing. Then? Okay. Never mind my clumsy attempt at humor, I wasn't really looking for an Abbott to my Costello, I was looking for the next *yin* to my *yang*. As I said, my scorecard was maybe only one success in twenty or thirty attempts, but doing it relentlessly and all the time brought a steady stream, and I really do wish I could remember them all—the “*long ones, tall ones, short ones, brown ones, black ones, round ones, crazy ones...*”—and maybe in time it'll come.

But before getting to more of that, back now to Denise and her big, angry, bison-looking older brother Larry. Aside from the eating club pooling tips for feasts, this unresolved drama was high on the survival agenda too, so it had to be dealt with before it dealt with me. I knew what he looked like because he was pointed out to me by a local co-worker in whom I may have confided. He was another regular barroom brawler hanging out in the beachside taverns who resembled a snorting buffalo. He didn't know me, at least not by sight, so that disadvantage was his. One afternoon, not too much after the fact, maybe a few weeks later, as I was driving around making deliveries, I spotted him by himself on a quiet side street getting out of his just parked car. This was it—zero hour, no time like the present, said the voice—so I stepped on the brake, said a quick prayer, jumped out of my ride, and started towards him. My abrupt and determined stride startled the guy, who dropped the packages he was carrying as he eyeballed me heading toward him while trying to figure out what was happening. He might have been plagued by a guilty conscience of his own, for as soon as I got close enough—but not too close—maybe from six feet away, having his full attention, told him who I was and that I was sorry for what happened (truly), implying by my presence and proximity that if he wanted to settle it further with me, verbally or otherwise, now would be the time. It was a risky move, even a bit *loco*, but since I wasn't going anywhere, that seemed like a better option than having to constantly worry about it and wait for him to come to me or for us to run into each other sometime somewhere when I may have been the one taken by surprise or otherwise unprepared. To my cautious relief, he said it was *cool*, accepted my apology (the roses?), that he held no grudge, and that, as far as he was concerned, it was over. How many guys was I gonna have to threaten to shoot or actually shoot? Sometimes you just gotta' take the initiative, even if it means paying a price, even a

substantial one. An enraged, stampeding, snorting buffalo-man charging me would have been as bad or worse than a Golden Gloves ironworker to be at war with, so now Big Brother Larry was checked off the list. Hopefully. There were no blood oaths or written guarantees; anything might happen; events were always subject to change so I could rest, but not rest easy; and, of course, there were still many regular barroom brawl misadventures to come when false bravado met authentic hostility, pushing me to insult, challenge, and then fight strangers at exactly the same time as being way too drunk to be any good at it. With this sad, lopsided, and baffling irony, I was intimately acquainted.

One of the cooler aspects of being stationed at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, aside the convenience, was the view of Manhattan Island across the East River. It's an awe-inspiring, breathtaking sight, especially at night. Without turning your head, you can see almost the entire borough as a single, towering, breathing behemoth, its clustered limbs like massive Olympian columns competing for glory, space, and height, a thousand thousand glowing eyes of scintillating light, the serpentine arteries of headlights pulsating along the perimeter of the base, helicopters and airplanes soaring above, all mirrored on the water's shimmering surface; a gargantuan organism roaring with the power of life, an unstoppable force of bold, creative, dynamic energy, defying gravity, rising from deep beneath the pavement reaching nearly into the endlessness of the silent night sky. It confronts you, looming right in front and high above, where you can't help but feel drawn in, challenged to take part in its orgasmic vibrancy in whatever capacity your circumstances provide. The less cool aspect of being stationed there is that, despite its prominence as an industrial hub during WWII, the neighborhood has a rough history of being unforgiving and uncharitable, more like a blue-collar colony of hard edges and even harder people dominated by characters like the Irish *White Hand* waterfront extortionists and then the Sicilian *Mano Nera*, Albert “the Lord High Executioner” Anastasia, and now the gangs of Latino immigrants and *up-from-the-South* housing project blacks, especially at night in the local barrooms.

The routine on a drill weekend would be to show up for muster at the assigned time on a Friday evening, check in, and then, hopefully, depending on your billet not having a work detail, check back out for *liberty* and a night run to the local taverns. By then, just after two or three of those monthly drills, my MC Fox varsity jacket and I were becoming somewhat well known on board. I was the new guy you had to watch out for when out partying with, the life of it until closing in on the death of it. But these guys, my fellow reservists and shipmates, were not particularly dissuaded by that. They musta' considered themselves responsible for me to keep me from being killed or late back on board the ship, and I gotta' hand it to them, not too many other crowds would have put up with this, but rowdiness of the drunken variety was not an abomination to these gents, so to them, despite the drama and danger, I was accepted as just one of the regular, if wilder, young guys. At that age, well, sailors, you know, it kinda' comes with the territory. None of us were looking for a career in the clergy, academia or Wall Street; none were Mom-Mom's (Kabbo: Volume I) *Phi Beta Kappa* candidates.

Liberty on the Red Hook Riviera

Funny thing, that song just came out and was a big hit, so standing on a downtown Brooklyn corner one late Friday afternoon, wearing that old-time, perfectly fit Cracker Jack sailor suit while waiting for a bus on Atlantic Avenue to take me to the base, shouts came from several passing cars: "*In the navy... in the navy...*" It seemed that life was imitating art again, and although it felt entirely like a fabrication of my imagination, or a dream, the ship was real, the other sailing men were real, and the checks were real too, so no matter how it may have been experienced internally, the fact was that the whole scene, almost exactly as described, was actually happening.

Later that particular chilly Friday night, as with almost all of them before in port, after reporting in for *muster*, I had *liberty*, which meant changing back into civvies and joining the carload of shipmates on an expedition to the local Red Hook barrooms. It must have been close to the winter holidays because of all the cheap, cardboard holiday, let's call it "Christmas" images

of cartoon elves, reindeer, and jingle bells, and the draped streams of silver and green tinsel adorning the dark-corner neighborhood gin joint, my favorite kind, with sawdust on the floor, a mini pool table, and a classic, crackling, flickering pinball machine (loved those flippers making solid contact with the steel balls). The decor, which to me even as a *Hebe* had nothing to do with religion or redemption via the birth of a messiah, had everything to do with the rebirth of a garish celebration of materialism, via real-life characters like the usual burly, 3:1 buy-back Irish bartender wearing a \$2.00 Woolworths' Santa hat. The overly cheerful holiday music pouring out of the house speakers from the jukebox was set to play the usual attempt at forced merriment: *Here Comes Santa Claus* and *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* kind of fare along with the occasional Tony Bennett hit and, of course, The Village People. Now, I'm not ordinarily much of a dancer, but I do have it in me, and once in a while it gets loose. There was a young lady there, a lovely local woman, darker skinned, with just the right curves, flashing just the right "kiss me" smile. This was mostly a Latino neighborhood, maybe some Irish holdovers; whether the Dominicans or their rivals, the Puerto Ricans, made no difference, the Seven Stars or the Savage Skulls, not my business, so I had no concerns when we quickly but informally paired up as a free-style dance couple. And man, there was all kinda' chemistry goin' on, and we let it fly. I was boozed-up just enough to be loose, agile, and rhythmic but too drunk to be careful or in any way discreet, diplomatic, or cautious. After the second or third song, the chemistry got so strong that I started kissing her, something I frequently did on similar occasions, right there in front of the jukebox, in front of everybody. *Whoops!* Reckless alert! Unheeded. Though she didn't complain or back away, one of the local patron spectators, or maybe a shipmate—it's vague—but someone warned me that her husband, boyfriend, or simply male escort was there and might be watching us and may not be pleased, so be advised. But the good ol' lizard-brain voice figured, *what's it his business? If she's dancing with me and having fun, enjoying herself and my attentions, well, then fuck him. Yeah, right, fuck him!* That's the kind of deep thinking my alcohol-saturated brain does for me, and since she didn't seem to be having any problems with me, or us, or what I was doing, I'd take my cues from her, not any supposed male

guardian lurking around stewing in the background. *Yeah, that's right, I said it, fuck him!*

Well, well, well... The next thing you know, another darker-skinned denizen, a Roberto Duran-style stocky dude about my age and size, appears right in front of me, where without a word spoken, his fists begin flying onto and off my face again and again in rapid fire, probably as many as five or six blows centered on my formerly handsome young mug. Boozy and numb, I was functionally powerless to stop him. Si, *esposo* was watching and *esposo* was indeed *mucho pissed-off-o*. My hands weren't even up in defense to block, deflect, or shield the blows, let alone coordinated or even coherent enough to return any fire. I barely felt them; they were more like electric shocks that flashed on and off as I watched motionlessly as the punches landed and were repeatedly thrown. She musta' gotten hers when they got back home. Like I said, from Pandora to Eve to Delilah, she could'a gently backed me away instead of keeping it going and feeding me the illicit thrills. Oh, well. Forget the blame. Chicks will be chicks. It was me. With blood all over the place but still standing, my shipmates dragged me out of the bar and back to the yard, where I woke up the next morning locked behind the steel fire door of an empty office room in one of the abandoned warehouses near the dock and told what happened. My face was evidence of the tale's accuracy, but not as bad as you might expect; swollen but not broken.

That was typical of a night out on the town with Seaman Recruit "Fuck Him" Kabakoff. Despite the danger to all and the risk he posed to the very foundations of the American military and western civilization as a whole, he was still somehow somewhat popular with those weekend warrior shipmates; the invitations never lagged. They locked me in that room to keep me from doing even more damage and getting into even more trouble, which, evidently, I was still preparing to do once we got back to the yard. Who knows what that may have been, but bless those guys for trying to warn me and keeping me whole and in one piece even after ignoring and endangering them, albeit a bruised and bloody one piece, then coming for me the next morning just in time for muster. This was living life to the fullest, straight out of my reckless teens, despite the rough seas, because, like The Village People sang it, "*In the Navy, you can sail the seven seas*. Yes, in

the navy you can put your mind at ease..." Yup, that's me, in the navy now, ready or not, about to hoist anchor and get *underway*, i.e., out at sea, though a mind at ease was still a long way off, unless it was soaked in John Barleycorn and eye-balling the abyss, as there was still a lot more narrow edge to walk and storm after storm to navigate. The voyage was barely getting started.

Back in Long Beach

In between hustling for Jimmy D, delivering for the chemist, and the eating club extravaganzas, there were women to be had, as many or more as could be squeezed into a lifetime. The main mission was to bed a lady down within 24 hours of first setting eyes on her, and it happened more than once—quite a few times, actually. I called it the *24-Hour Game*, and the clock always started running right at the gate, at first sight. And the others? Well, we either never got there or it may have taken a little more time—for some of them, a lot more. The strategy was to go for just about all of them: child-bearing age, married, single, divorced, all of them, scatter shot-style. That's when I met *Buttercup*, working a counter at one of the local corner luncheonettes on my coffee routine, and noticed her pretty face, chubby body, and sexy smile. After the first few encounters, smiles, and jokes, I gave her some kind of rare coin as a tip, maybe a Kennedy half dollar or foreign currency, nothing too special but something you didn't see every day, telling her it was a *lucky coin*. Man, was she impressed with that—not so much the coin itself as the idea that it was more of a gift than a tip, and she referred to it often as her lucky coin. It took longer than 24 hours for Buttercup—maybe a couple of weeks—but as soon as we had our first date, contact, it was all on. The whole package ignited, and the fire burned quite hot and quite bright right away. Fierce. Anyway, she was just one of many, but one of my steadies, probably more than once a week. The majority of the others were of the "wham, bam, and thank you, ma'am" variety, the easy-come, easy-goers. And of course, either way, win, lose, or keep playing, it was a constant effort, even at work, no days off, and none were safe. In fact, everywhere Jimmy took me in our little red truck that

could, there were ladies, obviously, and many of them we saw again and again on our regular stops—factories, warehouses, truck stops, diners—so the fruit was on the vine and the vine was at hand. I think he liked watching this young, hungry guy in action, and a few of them on the truck routes did actually succumb to my boyish insistence and somewhat elevated blue-collar charm, meaning I could use words with more than two syllables, and rarely, if ever, was I vulgar.

One in particular was some kind of floor boss at a linen factory in good old Red Hook, Maribel or Maribeth, another young Latina (possibly my favorite variety of the species at the time), who was young and, aside from her faint mustache, was pretty cute and very well built. After getting to know me a bit, she invited me to a house party in her neighborhood on a Friday night. Man, that was a party. They know how to do it too—pull out all the stops and just have a lot of fun. It was in a rundown townhouse deep in the heart of Bush Terminal, and the place was jammed with neighborhood friends letting off pent-up work-week steam and with me, who brought no guests, on my own and probably the only green-eyed gringo in the crowd. It was basically all about dancing, laughing, flirting, and drinking, and I did a lot of it all. In the basement was a cockfight ring, a straw-covered, rounded, and roped-off space about twelve feet in diameter, where I discovered myself dancing like crazy to salsa (not my favorite, too fast and happy). Of all the strange things you can imagine, it also happened that my position was so close to another solo caballero, a local dude, that we ended up in a sort of spontaneous dance face-off, not coordinated contact dancing but more like competitive dancing, almost homoerotic, and the spectacle drew a large and lively crowd. Almost the whole party came downstairs to watch us go at it, me doing my best John Travolta and him doing his Latino thing, whatever it was, but it was electrifying, the force and playful ferocity. I think it made the girls hot too, which is surely what drove us to mix a sort of martial arts gymnastics charade with a free-style frenzied dance routine—which is about the last thing I remember—trying to outdo each other with risky and crazy mock violence moves like close rhythmic kicking, punching, ducking and spinning. The next thing was waking up in the morning with straw in my hair and smelling like a dead rooster after passing out in the cockfight ring—the indisputable evidence of a time well spent in anybody's book. But I

never got with Maribeth. The chiquita somehow slipped through the cracks of my dancing delirium, and though I tried to ignore it, that upper lip hair was kinda' repulsive anyway. It's a damn shame too; she could've done something about it, and the fact that she chose not to made it even worse. In any case, the otherwise pretty girl was just one of the innumerable females I tried for but never made—an endless galaxy of those. That's life, and the reason I had to keep at it—so many women, so little time. Otherwise? That was a party to remember, and even more strangely, I didn't get into a single fight that night, not even any harsh words or threats. Bizarre. Miracles can happen when partying with Latinos on straw in a cockfighting ring—that's the moral of the story.

Back on board the good ship MC Fox

Another *party* night to recall was up in Rhode Island, Newport, where we sailed from Brooklyn and ported during a routine weekend drill. And again, like almost always, my billet had *liberty* just about as soon as we docked, so the sailor-men, about five or six of us, headed by taxi into town for a bit of fast action at the local nighttime hot spot, where, true to form, things went black, as in *blackout*, shortly after arriving. The next thing you know, as a degree of consciousness returns, I'm running, not walking quickly or even trotting, but running full speed towards the already moving taxi with the guys inside who kept one of the rear doors open for me as it pulled away from the crowd, just ahead of the mob of locals chasing us with the apparent aim of causing us meaningful harm. What happened to bring that about? It was probably me again—maybe someone I kissed, hit, insulted, poured a drink on, or threatened. Who knows? I don't. The possibilities are endless. Maybe it wasn't even me that time, though it's doubtful. It almost always was. But somehow, I made it into the car just in time for us to skedaddle out of there and make it back to the ship alive and on schedule. There was never a dull moment back then, always on the edge, literally or figuratively, and oftentimes both.

If it wasn't a fistfight, a criminal charge, a narrow escape from a lynching, a sea voyage, or a cross-country hitchhiking adventure, it was a love-in.

Veronica was really pretty. And crazy. They often come in a package like that. In fact, it's my theory that being beautiful actually makes a lot of women crazy. It's the power they wield and the constant attention it brings that goes to their heads, where they can't handle it, at least not most of them, at least not gracefully or noticeably. It makes them nuts or anti-social at the very least. But I wasn't practicing psychotherapy, so her mental state wasn't much of a concern. Her looks, temperament, and pedigree, though, most certainly were: dirty blonde hair, a wild Jewish chick from the beach with all the right parts in all the right places and proportions, about my age, and also out of her parents' house. Her limited vocabulary consisted mainly of "yes," "okay," and "sure," the extent of our usual discourse.

We may have met while she was wandering around my boardwalk hunting grounds, communing with the ghosts of Daisy Buchanan and Blanche Dubois, along with the rest of the loonies and spirits, with whom she could have easily blended in were it not for the fact that she kept herself clean and relatively well dressed with one foot still on the earth, sort of, but again, who cared? I wanted her. She liked me and said yes, which was all there was to be concerned with because that was all that mattered. The "yes," along with her tits, ass, and pretty face, are among the most important things in life, coming in just after air, water, health, and food, and way ahead of money, power, education, or prestige. It's a shame you can't find all three, along with a sound mind and a warm heart, to support the vital yes; I certainly couldn't. They exist out there, I'm told, like UFOs, angels, and alien life forms, but sadly, if not ironically for a swell fella like me, seldom if ever found. Even on the odd occasion when *Hera* does shine on me like that, it's fleeting, almost phantom-like, here and gone.

One night, when returning from an evening out, probably the pizza-delivery profession (and all you could eat and pilfer as unofficial added benefits), I unlocked and opened my front door only to find there she was, Veronica, already in my bed, under the covers, and already naked. Now that was a pleasant surprise, but one my life was set up to include, so it was not an off-the-charts surprise like the letter from Floyd Bennett Field was and hardly as impactful, but a really happy one anyway and well worth recalling. Good things happen, bad things happen; that's how it goes, tide in, tide out; only

the pacing changes, or seems to. We know which one this was. How she got in is hard to say. She wasn't very adept at speaking or otherwise explaining herself, so only a half-hearted effort was made to discover an explanation. Nothing she ever said seemed to make any full sense, only fragments of ideas. She was probably better at climbing through unlocked windows, but it hardly mattered. What mattered was that she was there, and we were set to go. This was a good thing, so there was no need to launch an investigation or conduct an interrogation. And we did.

Have loud purple Cadillac, will travel

There were at least two outstanding and somewhat underrated pizza joints in town, the Amalfi and the Bel-Aire, and I worked at both for several months each, first at Amalfi, then at Bel-Aire, then back at Amalfi. They were both fun and had great food, but I was far more committed to Amalfi, where I found far more action to my liking than at the more subdued, slightly higher up the scale, elegant Bel-Aire on the beach, right at the end of the boardwalk's quieter quarter, on New York Avenue, the beginning of the West End's state streets, where it was well placed neighborhood-wise but dull.

They were actually more than just run-of-the-mill take-out places; they prepared and delivered gourmet meals, great food at fair prices, brought right to your front door, hot and fresh. And they were run by tight crews, from the owners to the chefs down to the delivery drivers and everyone in between. Amalfi was close to the center of town, owned by three and run by two brothers, the two of them hard-working, honest, and decent chaps, Cosmo and Luigi; but the third brother, a slick Dean Martin type whose name doesn't register, well, he had his hands in other outside operations, and I always got the feeling from him that he may have been connected to some of the guys who make offers no one refuses. He had that air about him of easy money, the quiet, usually smirking confidence that comes from an assumption of power, enjoying a fast and glamorous (Long Island style) life with alligator shoes, gold necklaces, a pinkie ring, and fancy hair cuts.

But that didn't bother me; I was in it for the dough, and not just the pizza dough drenched in imported mozzarella and home-made tomato sauce. (Sorry) Cosmo looked like a typical aging construction worker: maybe five foot seven or eight, broad shouldered and barrel chested but now overweight; what used to be muscle was now not; a lot of pasta, cannoli, and vino will do that by middle age; thick gray hair slicked back; always on the go; a fatherly type; huffing and puffing while he hustled back and forth from the kitchen to the service counter; and he wore a big gold crucifix, so you could see how pious he was. Right, Cosmo, sure, I get it: *Hail Mary, full of grace!* No problem. Otherwise, it's an essential part of the Brooklyn-bred *Dago* street uniform, another *de rigueur*. And Uncle Luigi, who may have worn one too, looked like a middle-aged and overweight munchkin with a mop-top Beatle haircut and no gray despite being a bit older and perhaps a bit sharper than his younger brother. He was a short-legged guy, maybe my height or just below, smoked a cigar, and had the same air of urgency and command as Cosmo did. The dinner time rush was always like D-Day there, with do-or-die urgency, as if delivering a lot of great Italian food on time and to the right address was the operational equivalent of storming Normandy: intense and determined. Despite their stress and their type-A personalities, I liked these guys and this place, and they liked me too. They never asked how "a Jew" feels about this or that. It wasn't an issue; if anything, whenever the topic may have come up, as many of their best customers were fellow tribesmen, without saying so, you could tell they respected us as hard-working, talented and successful folks. Besides, nobody they didn't like would have lasted long in their joint anyway, because America's Healthiest City was saturated with ambitionless part-timers, bar-flies, day-surfers, and an assortment of mostly harmless ne'er-do-wells looking for quick, legal, daily cash, so they had plenty of employee options available and, admittedly, despite all that, deserved better from me than I sometimes gave them. More about that later—another true confession.

The whole team felt like a tight little family, like a mini-*cosa nostra* crew, and a few of us were even after-work friends. One of them was a young, affable chap, a chef; another *Tom*, Levi, pronounced with a long *E* and *I*, like the jeans. He was a long-haired, husky, goateed, knife-carrying, half-Roman-Catholic Italian and half-Ashkenazi Jewish mutt fella, upbeat and kinda'

tough; he'd rumble, maybe even slice off your ear, but also kinda' smart; he could speak in full sentences and not just about food but about local politics, music, and business; he wanted to own his own place; and I would occasionally drink and party with him to the usual state of oblivion. One late June or early July night, just across from his east side apartment and not far from the Denise incident, we got shitfaced drunk and headed out to the beach in a thunderstorm.

There we crawled out to the edge of the jetties, where, on the huge, slippery stones in the fierce winds, we roared out a toast to Valhalla with his favorite, capful shots of flaming Southern Comfort. It wasn't easy lighting the booze on fire with a cigarette lighter in a rainstorm on the rough, wet jetties, but with enough persistence it can be done. That was the mission, that was the ritual, and that's how guys like us bonded—doing crazy, risky, pointless things for no other reason than to just make them happen and remember them and talk about them later. On another, drier summer night, we hitchhiked all the way out to the Hamptons, a journey of almost a hundred miles. We started out at about midnight, right after work, and arrived alive at Hot Dog Beach by early morning, just in time to watch the sunrise before crashing on the sand of the only free public beach out there. We slept half the day away, waking up with sand everywhere—in my hair, ears, and shorts—and waves creeping in only a few short feet from us; another ten minutes and we'd be washed away at sea.

Just as the preparations for that night's annual Fourth of July bash got going, somehow we got separated. Affable Tom probably found a lady, but who knows? Anyway, I grew quickly bored with the scene, so hitched back early that afternoon, solo, which took the rest of the day, all the way past Long Beach and into Manhattan by late afternoon. In Times Square, my second favorite hunting ground, I bought a theater ticket, a couple of cold *tall boys* (16 oz. beer cans), smuggled them in, and watched *Alien* on the big screen before sneaking back to the beach with empty pockets and flat broke, stowing away in the bathroom of a packed LIRR car. Happy Independence Day, everyone. That's how you celebrate! Declare your independence and run wild and free. The entire memorable journey was fueled not only by the courage of the Founders and the thrill of the

hitchhiking risk and the love of constant motion but also, maybe even most importantly, by the last of my Black Beauty (amphetamines) and weed stash, which taken together and washed down by cold Heinekens were the surest way for me to fly first class.

The quiet action at Amalfi that kept me plugged in came in the form of a couple little ethically challenged side hustles, which I'll get to, but first, for added context, an example or two of the tight bonds we shared as a crew: One of the other chefs, a pale-skinned, skinny, thirty-year-old Scots-Irish guy, was a habitual drunk. Occasionally, he'd even pass out on duty right by the stove, but they never fired him. Instead, they'd carry him to the backroom storage area, where among the gallon-sized cans of crushed tomatoes and mounds of pizza boxes was a designated cot in waiting. They'd gently lay him down, call his wife, then call in one of the other chefs on standby, let him sleep it off, and then put him right back to work as soon as he came to. Sometimes they even fed him booze to stop the tremors. This was a bad case of the John Barleycorn blues. Once, when it looked like he might not be breathing, we had to call the EMS boys, who carried him out the front door on a stretcher in the middle of the afternoon and took him straight to the hospital. His position, though, as one of two full-time rotating chefs, remained secure. He musta' been one hell of a cook, but aside from that, it was more about loyalty and appreciation, compassion, desperation, and a pinch or two of respect for his struggle. Though he was chronically disabled by his alcoholism to varying degrees, he was always on time and never gave up trying to handle it—to keep working, working, working, and drinking, drinking, and drinking while getting the orders right—and mostly succeeded. A better example: one night I was late getting back from deliveries, highly unusual, not sure why, probably held up by one of the weird things that occasionally but rarely happen, like the time when the customer's Atlantic Beach bungalow door opened and the freshly scrubbed and lightly powdered lady of the house was lying stark naked on the living room couch, center stage, right there, just a few short feet from me, breathing close, her boyfriend or husband beckoning me inward and pointing to her, "*That's your tip,*" he tells me, probably expecting me to freak out and panic, which I gather was going to be the night's entertainment, but instead I went right for her, getting down on my knees by the edge of the

couch, my face mere inches from her freshly coiffed *hoochie*. That's when he quickly called it quits because my next move was gonna involve contact, which, I guess, wasn't going according to plan, so he paid me and showed me the door. *Weird*. Anything might happen. Aside from something unusual like that (it may have actually been that night), my being MIA for maybe a half hour on a busy weekend night was cause for alarm. As soon as I got back to base, just a few minutes later, a squad of the other delivery drivers returned, my colleagues and buddies, looking worried, each carrying a bat or a golf club. They were the praetorian guard of regular drivers: Big Lou, the dark-haired, broad-shouldered, acne-scarred community college ball player with black, deeply set eyes, was probably about 6' 2" and 240 lbs., a personable enough chap able to laugh at life and himself, but you wouldn't want to get on his bad side. When he stopped smiling and looked serious, he was a whole 'nother guy, an offensive lineman, as he once let it be known. Lou, war-faced with a determined stride, gripping a short wooden bat but without a smile, was an imposing sight, leaving a lasting impression as a good ally to have and not to be taken for granted. And there was Robert Tortaglio, a high school hockey player and part-time lifeguard, a clean-cut, low-key, stand-up kid who was easy to be around; he, too, was having fun at Amalfi; and the weasley Paul, a long-haired, tatted-up weed peddler with the golf club who wasn't unfamiliar with the county lockup, and maybe another one or two, a driver and counter clerk, who all went looking for me, fearing I may have gotten robbed or somehow injured, or maybe the car broke down and I was stuck somewhere, tracking me by my list of delivery addresses, and were immediately visibly relieved to see I was already back and okay; they were actually worried; I saw it in all their faces before they spotted me, coming back without me. After things settled down a bit before my next run, Luigi took me quietly aside and told me he had sent the search party for me. Then, pausing briefly for effect, he stared me straight in the eye and added that if any of them ever went missing, I'd be expected to go out searching for them too, with all that might entail. *Capish?* To which I right away responded in a matching solemn tone, "Yes, *of course,*" the only acceptable response. Loyalty. Got it, like Jimmy D in the luxury high-rise, at least like that.

They were very busy operations, both the *Bel-Aire* and *Amalfi*, absolute cash cows. Focusing on *Amalfi*, as the calls came in rapid fire during dinner hour, especially on weekends when the orders were shipped out almost as quickly, usually four or five at a time, our job was to get them to the hungry customers as fast as possible, without any speeding or parking tickets, car accidents, or order screwups, and while the orders were fresh and hot, increasing the chances of a decent tip, then fly back to base for the next run. The quicker and more efficiently you could operate and not screw anything up, as in damaging or mixing up the orders, the more money, generally speaking, you would make, and like I said, I was good behind the wheel, knowing the neighborhood pretty well by then, having been there since the fall, and resourceful enough to figure things out even when I didn't. Now, as far as the side hustles go, there were a few tricks to play that would boost my earnings, enough to keep me snugly plugged into the game. The actual base pay was not very much, very little in fact—probably minimum wage or just slightly above. The main bounty was expected to be tips, but even on a good night, there wasn't enough to justify all the time and effort unless you could find some additional creative ways to supplement the straight earnings. All told, though? It was a lot of fun, and we ate quite well because each shift included a free meal: any pasta dish and all the warm ciabatta and olive oil you could eat, but not the veal, fish, lobster, or clams; those you had to pay for, and as good as they were, they weren't quite worth taking that big a hit from the night's pay. It was stuffed shells with ricotta, sausage and pepper heroes, chicken cutlet parmesan, meatballs made from mixing ground veal, beef, and pork, Fettuccine Alfredo, and baked lasagna 'til they came out of your ears, which was never because it was always spectacular dining, and occasionally you might be rewarded for some sacrifice you may have been asked to make, like swapping a shift, coming in early to fold pizza boxes, or staying late to help clean up, with a veal parmesan hero or a chicken marsala plate. Great stuff, all of it, bathed in that home-made, five-gallon drum of tomato sauce, prepared daily and seasoned with loving care, including the first-class antipasto, hot or cold, fried artichoke hearts and anchovies, chunks of provolone cheese and fresh tomatoes and peppers, and fresh fat, black, and green olives dripping in oil, never canned, sacrilege. *See the cross?* Get it now? The man had conviction and applied it where it counted. Food.

Love them Italians; even their everyday bread—that fresh ciabatta—was insane.

Anchors Away

Word got to me of an annual event with that other crew I ran with, the one aboard the MC Fox. *Sailed* with, that is. Every year, coinciding with the school spring break and Easter/Passover time, they held a mandatory two-week active duty drill where we'd be out to sea almost the entire time, on patrol and exercise training for war at sea, and all were required to attend. Holy crow's nest, Captain! *This was going to be really something*. First, a commercial flight down to Jacksonville, Florida, where we weekend warriors would meet up with the backbone crew and the ship already ported there, and once fully assembled, sail down to Puerto Rico and practice naval maneuvers, including live fire drills with the big guns, for a few days, then sail all the way back to New York, which was going to mean almost two full weeks at sea. This drill would complete the realization of my sailor's dream: out to sea for a spell—not just an overnight or two like the round-trip voyages to Newport and back to Brooklyn, not even time to develop “sea legs,” but really out there, in the salt air, a full-flavored taste of life aboard my Pequod DD-829. *Call me Ishmael!* *This*, I vowed, *would not be missed*. All I had to do for now was hang on 'til then—a few more months, just through the Long Beach winter, and not get into too much trouble before then, like getting locked up for a drunken hit and run or killed in a bar fight. Sounds reasonable enough, right? *Ha!* Sure. Easy enough. Maybe for most people sitting peacefully on a park bench, including shoe salesmen, but not so much for this young, swabbie pizza deck delivery man with his raging passion for reckless disregard. This urgent challenge was gonna take all the discipline I could muster to meet, overcome, and make happen. But for now, all I will report is that it happened—if not the *seven seas*, then definitely a voyage to remember serving the great American eastern seaboard.

All aboard!

Back at the beach, Cosmo had a rumbling, purple-red, dinged-up but dependable Cadillac—a huge Sedan deVille he donated to the business for delivery work. It had a monster engine, like maybe 450 cc's or something; who knows the horsepower, but it was a lot; it got about ten miles a gallon, which we didn't pay for; it had a great AM/FM radio, the louder the better; it had kickass speakers too, so if you got to work first, say fifteen minutes before the shift actually started, you could choose your own of the three or four they had available, which was exactly what I did every chance I got. If someone else got to it first, I'd try to bargain them out of it, but there's little or no chance of success with that. Everyone wanted this hideous monster jalopy with the great tunes and fast gas pedal. The other jalopies were like old bullshit Ford Pintos or Chevy Chevettes, not fun, cool, or fast, and worst of all? Only AM radios, which are torture to my ears, if not death to my soul. Forget it. I loved that big, ugly, comic-book looking machine with its super comfortable ride. Just a slight tap on the pedal would have you flying in a thundercloud through time and space like a comet on fire, and that FM stereo? Blasting *Bad Company* or *Boston*? You could hear the pizza man's engine roar from bl[locks away. That's my style: loud and ugly, fast and powerful. The pizza man from Amalfi arrives in style. One of the aforementioned summertime tricks was to buy a gallon bottle of Gallo table wine and sell Dixie cups of it to the kids who were sent to the front gate of the beach clubs to retrieve the hot orders from the drivers. Oftentimes, the parents, by sending the kids and not having to face the working stiffs, would stiff us on the tips, little or none, so I fixed that by selling these little teenyboppers the wine for fifty cents a cup. That was a big hit, and I never got busted for it. Surprisingly, the kids never ratted. *Omerta*. The other trick—well, before disclosing it, permit me to say, for whatever it may be worth, list it under the heading of things I'm not proud of but cannot hide. Leaving it out would defeat the fundamental, if not *only*, intended purpose of this candid memoir, which is to serve as a report, some of it a confession. What I was, what happened, and what I did—getting it out and making it last in some way—as a modest legacy of a life fully lived and put to print, the good, the bad, and the in between, so help me Zeus.

Well, here goes: as I said, the pay was not great, even with successful hustles of tips and Dixie cup tricks, so keeping the job viable (here's my excuse) required upping the pay so it would be worth doing in a practical sense and not simply a lot of fun and good eating. An average night's pay would range, say, between \$25 and \$45. \$45 to \$55 or \$60 would be a whole lot better and, in effect, a reasonable night's pay given the effort at the time. No one sat on their asses. And of course, there was that ever-present element of greed that plagues so many of us flawed mortals. So, how to make that happen? Well, it wasn't my idea. I'm not ordinarily that crafty; I just noticed one of the other drivers pulling it, but it involves, of course, *theft*. Stealing from the bosses, theft from the house. Swindling. When we went out on our respective deliveries, we brought along one of three copies of a paper bill to present to the customer, which had our names or initials on it, so at the end of the night, when they were tallied up, the bosses knew how much to collect from each driver. The customer got a copy, the driver had a copy, and the house had one, which, upon leaving for the run, the cashier slipped through a narrow slot into the steel strong box about the size of a cardboard Kleenex container at the counter top in the rear of the shop, designated for that purpose and placed somewhere close to the cash register. By extracting one or two of the bills with your name on them before closing out, the tally would be less than the amount of those bills, and the box wasn't that hard to get into. All you needed was an unseen moment or two alone with it, which I kept my eyes open for once it got busy enough to be a bit hectic and so provide some cover. Look, I can say *they should have paid us more than minimum wage, or a gratuity should have been added to the bill*, or the old tried-but-not-true standby "*everybody steals*" canard, whatever, but they don't wash. I just did it and shouldn't have. *Guilty*. But I did do it, and got away with it every time. Later on, down the road a few years, in a delusional exercise of moral rectitude and recovery prompted by broader life experiences (I'll leave it at that for now), I made a gesture of restitution by strolling into the joint one fine afternoon, practically out of the blue, long after no longer working there, soon after beginning *Arkay Trucking*, and handing the slick-looking brother with the pinky ring who just happened to be alone there that day a crisp hundred-dollar bill. I never told him what it was for, and he didn't ask. Had he? I'd had to make something up: *it's for good luck, paesan, in bocca a*

lupo, which of course he wouldn't believe, but that would be the extent of my attempt at contrition. Good thing neither of the other two brothers were there that day; it's doubtful I would have been able to face them without making a full confession. They were good, honest, and hard-working guys, and I was a cheat. A petty thief. Anyhow, cement shoes weren't part of the bargain in my book, so that's that. He probably thought I was cracked in the head, gave me a slightly surprised look, a half-smile, and pocketed the bill without even asking. He may have figured something close, but it's doubtful he ever even told Luigi or Cosmo about it. Who knows? He probably took it to the track and lost it. It didn't clear my conscience either. Well, maybe a little bit, but not a whole lot, and only for a short while, after which I felt foolish and don't think I ever did that again to any of my other bosses (except the taxi companies, which wasn't exactly the same and they deserved it anyway, low-life parasitic wretches as they were), so maybe it was some kind of learning experience. Perhaps parting with that C-note was just a fantasy exercise, as if I were now a righteous big shot, Mohandas Gandhi without the staff or hunger, attempting to expunge my greed and clear my conscience with false modesty and vanity charity. Again, who knows? I stole many hundreds over the months, so I let myself off cheap in my pampered delusion. Anyway, that's what happened, and this is what it's all about—even the ugly truth.

Attention on Deck!

That Cracker Jack suit came in very handy. As we sailed into the harbor in the port of Old San Juan, all the sailors not otherwise assigned were ordered to muster on the main deck and surround the boat's perimeter, shoulder to shoulder, facing outward, dressed in our formal uniforms, blues or whites. *The Yanks are coming*, alert and alive; it was a surreal moment of pride, all hands on deck, like conquering heroes returning triumphantly from a battle fought long ago but still holding sway. Uncle Sam kicked the Spaniards out of there almost a century before, a battle never joined by this sailor, who rarely battled outside of the ones engineered by his own design, but still, in its glorious wake, it looked and felt like quite a display, docking

under the sun, the sea-salt air filling my young lungs, standing proudly at ease, solemn-faced, for all intents and purposes, a worthy member of the crew in a great-fitting suit.

And we had an audience. The folks ashore were watching, maybe a hundred or more of them: locals, workers, merchants, families, vagrants and tourists; although it was a regular stop, an important base in the Caribbean, it's not every day a navy destroyer docks there, so it was something to see, though none of them appeared terribly pleased by our arrival; smiles were scant, more curiosity or even suspicion than appreciation or respect. I'd later find out why, but for now, it was all about me, about us, and about this great adventure already well in progress.

One of the regular crew members, a wiry looking red-headed guy, probably an E3 or E4, who seemed born to the task, when we got close enough to the pier, a couple of feet, maybe a yard, he jumped over the outer railing, one leg still on the deck and the other now on the dock, high above the water's surface, maybe thirty feet, and with immense physical strength, coordination, and focus, he struggled to position one of the solid rubber barrel-shaped bumpers, about the size of an ordinary household thirty-gallon trash can, by lifting and shifting and tugging on the thick rope cable it was suspended from. They keep the steel ship from pounding into the wooden dock and the wooden dock from being pounded on by the gargantuan mass of floating steel as it lifts, tilts, and rocks with the tides and the waves. Those things had to weigh like 200 lbs. apiece, maybe more, but with visible intensity and in only a minute or two of full effort, he got it done, placed just right, then on to the next, staggered across the length of the port side by about 10 feet each, and there were like eight or nine of them, so he had help. A few of the other seaworthy sailors of the MC Fox, though maybe not as agile but just as determined, joined the detail. I took it all in, the whole scene, watching carefully, thinking maybe I might be up next, or at least up soon. It's a basic sailor's duty, like standing watches or chipping paint. Since I hadn't even finished basic and barely knew *bow* from *stern*, and aside from the five or six weekend drills before that, everything was still pretty new to me and a real-time learning experience that I devoured, I had to. No excuses for failing this exercise; this was not moving furniture or

delivering pizza; it was the military, upon which everything else in American life depends. Beyond that? *It was really, really cool.* And that uniform? Perfectly fit and worn just right, despite the store-bought knockoff cap, this was clearly my day to wear it proudly on board my ship, under the gleaming rays of the tropical sun. You can forget waiting for a bus on a Brooklyn ghetto street corner, but here, now, today, "*In the Navy..*" meant something that crystallized completely for the first time that day on the top deck of a fully armed destroyer in the Caribbean, one of the crew, docking in a faraway land in mid-April, when and where there's quite a bit of sunshine and clear salt air, glowing and warm to highlight the scene and bask proudly beneath and within. Simply put, it was undeniably, circumstances notwithstanding, for that little Brooklyn boy who watched *Moby Dick* seven nights a week—his sailor's dream coming true.

And wouldn't you know it? If not Zeus, Hera, or Neptune, then perhaps Loki, the trickster god, sometimes provides. When they posted the duty roster, again by billet, mine had liberty for every slot of every shift of the 48 hours or so we'd be in port, which meant no sooner were we fully docked than I was fixin' to change back into landlubber gear and hit the shore. The issue now was spending money, which I didn't bring enough of; not enough available to fill my pockets and have fun with right then, but guess what? Again, there was a handy, if exorbitant, solution right on board, just below deck. Seaman Pasqualuccio, a skinny guinea from Brooklyn and a middle-aged part-timer whose nose was almost as big as his entire head, came prepared by bringing enough *cashola* to happily loan to his shipmate pals and friends, who often needed a quick loan for generally the same purpose—party money. Thinking ahead, this wise and generous seafarer brought enough to share at the not-so-friendly rate of 2:1. That is, for every dollar you borrowed, he wanted back two; stickup rates, but still the surest, quickest, and closest offer available right then and there. He knew his customers, knew where they could be found, and I doubt he ever had any trouble collecting, as he likely had a dedicated staff of qualified sharks available for just that purpose should the unlikely need ever arrive. It might have even been his civilian occupation. Use your imagination. But anyway, figuring this was a once-around event and I wanted to spend, it didn't really matter, so I borrowed a twenty-spot, which would get me nice and drunk,

fed, and around the island until it was time for muster again the next morning at some ungodly military time, say, 0600 hours or something close. For now, though, back in my civvies, equipped with the cash, and on my own—no partners this time; I didn't want a) any witnesses or b) anyone holding me back from my adventures—I headed ashore solo.

Seymour and Vito at the Bel-Aire

At some point during my professional pizza delivery career, I switched to the Bel-Aire. It was actually much closer to my studio, only about two blocks away, and favorably situated at the very western edge of the boardwalk, right where beach-goers would enter or exit the beach from the street, so they would have to pass by the shop on their way in or out, where the odor of fresh baked pizza, calamari, and tomato sauce was unavoidable. The food there was just as good as at Amalfi's, quite good, but it was a smaller and quieter operation run by the owner, Vito, a real Italian actually from the old country, not a Bensonhurst, Bay Ridge, or Rego Park-style Italian, and that man too was a gentleman. He was a six-foot-tall, broad-shouldered guy in his late thirties or early forties, fearsome in appearance, slightly graying dark hair blow-dried and perfect, wearing tinted brown shades even at night, with a faint red, I don't know what, maybe a birthmark, covering a lot of one side of his face and neck, not raised or gruesome or anything, more distinctive, a different skin pigmentation, and along with his heavy accent, that made him that much more charismatic and memorable. He was the kind of guy who could wear a white apron all day and night in a working kitchen and effortlessly have it remain spotless the entire shift. All in all, it was a classier little neighborhood eatery and takeout joint than Amalfi, seating about twelve, about the same as Amalfi, but not as busy, with only two drivers each shift, one for east orders and one for west orders, and no big, loud, ugly, red Caddy to have fun with, just the standard high-mileage, low-profile Chevettas and Pinto-style dull rides, like amusement park go-carts on four wheels, strictly utilitarian, not fun. Boring. But there was money to be made, cash every night, and a good meal, so it worked well, until it didn't. I'll get to that. And there was no funny business on my part there, because there was no opportunity; Vito was a *hands-on* everything guy; it

was just him, a cashier girl, the chef, and two drivers. Tight ship. The other driver, an older chap, trim, probably in his early fifties, and maybe a bit of a goofball, was a kind of manchild-like guy named Seymour. He was a Long Beach staple, a good-natured, balding, and grinning knockaround guy who filled in as driver at the chemist at times, but usually during the spring and summer days hung around the three or four food and fun operations clustered up on the center of the boardwalk, from where my surfside hunting expeditions were staged. One of these local legend places was a fast food eatery—a hot dog, corn on the cob, and beer on tap kind of place—also named *Seymour's*, but aside from the coincidence, there was no relation, to my knowledge, with the only association being the names and that Seymour hung out and sometimes filled in behind the counter there as well.

One rainy night in the early spring, Seymour called in sick—a rare event, whatever—but he never came in, which meant I had the opportunity to make roughly double the money by handling both east and west. Naturally, I jumped right on it and got myself in gear and focused, but unfortunately, my focus was more on the *moolah* and maybe finding a Veronica-like surprise in my bed when work was done than on the road, and so, about half-way into the double-duty shift, with rain still coming down fast and hard on the dark street, I slammed head-on into the traffic light stationed at a quiet downtown intersection. It musta' suddenly jumped right in front of me, 'cause I swear the first time I saw it was when the cops dragged me out of the wrecked and steaming vehicle and ushered me into an ambulance. It's funny 'cause these were the same cops, the same department, that I cursed so vulgarly a short time before for failing me—the ones that kicked a field goal into my face while handcuffed behind my back—but now they came to my rescue as if I were just another decent, ordinary, hard-working citizen. It might have been a different squad, but by then my reputation in town was growing, so it's likely I was recognized, if not actually known. No hard feelings. Cops. The good, the bad, and the in between, just like yours truly, just about like everyone else, except they carry a heavier load than most and, with it, a gun. Anyway, Vito, of course, was called right away, and somehow he got a hold of my mom to assure her that all the medical bills would be covered as well as the cost of replacing the car because he was

fully covered insurance-wise, which meant a lot to me at the time, and he wanted to know how I was doing and be kept informed. I thought he'd be pissed, but he wasn't; rather, he was concerned and available. As I said, a gentleman, and a cautious one at that. It's a good thing he never let his paperwork get too far out of sight for too long; for both of us, there's enough remorse as it is. Read on; there was no need for any more.

It turns out, though, that I wasn't the only driver to have screwed up pretty badly. Remember when ol' *Horsehead* asked me to "see *what you can do*" about getting him the delivery job at the chemist that seemed so important to him? A minimum wage job, relying on daily tips to eat? Puzzling. But the mystery began to solve itself when word got out that he had some kind of less serious traffic incident or accident on a routine delivery and left the disabled car stalled somewhere on the busy midday streets of downtown Long Beach. *Horse* just abandoned it along with much of the contents and took off, going MIA while the ol' jalopy overheated and shook, blocking traffic in the center lane of the main commercial drag without even bothering to call them. Whatever happened, he just got out and split, never to be seen or heard from by them again. Some of the stock, though, that was not abandoned, was missing: the scheduled stuff, the morphine, and the codeine-laced cough medicine that was either out for delivery or that he just may have helped himself to at some point during his short career there. That was the urgency. He had a budding Jones. Tough. Yeah, but no one forces it on you. You force it on yourself (and when it gets really rough, ask for sympathy and support). By that time, I'd already moved on, now working for the surgical supply company across the street from the pharmacy, setting up hospital beds and delivering oxygen tanks to private homes now serving as hospice, which, besides being depressing (one week you deliver, the next you pick back up), was much more in line with what I wanted to be doing anyway, *trucking*, so the incident passed without any further involvement from me, despite the fact that he was hired through my recommendation, but the secrecy and deceit, never even mentioning it to me, and when I brought it up? He stonewalled and was annoyed by my even bringing it up just to hear from him—*what happened?* The stain on our friendship lingered, so I wasn't completely surprised when it turned out to be only the first of several painful betrayals to come.

A night in Old San Juan

First stop ashore? Why, a *casino*, naturally. There it was, maybe five minutes by taxi from the base, legal, all lit up, with beautiful babes abounding, but gambling *per se*, as in card games, craps, or even pulling one-armed bandits, was never my thing. Games in general, aside from pool and chess, don't really grab me; too much effort for too little return. I'll give it a try, of course, like I did on my cross-country extravaganza, stopping in Las Vegas that time, but I'd rather smoke weed, get laid, or get drunk. Free money though—who doesn't love that? But once there's a loss (usually pretty quickly), it pisses me off, and I quit. That's it. Even if I win a few bucks once or twice in a blue moon, like on that stop in Vegas, quitting is definitely the next move. Sure, yeah, I like free money and don't want to give any back, so, as they say, stay ahead by quitting. Otherwise, it's a sucker's game, and unless you're really, really good at calculating odds, counting cards, and bluffing, guess who's the sucker? That's right. After losing a bet or two on the Roulette table, I was out of there, pissed off, booze in hand, and back on the streets, headed to the beach for another kind of risk-reward action more my speed, and it wasn't chess or pool.

When the original film came out, "Rocky," the first and only one worth watching, was a masterpiece, and every red-blooded American guy I knew wanted to be him. We wanted a share of that masculinity, even if it meant drastic moves like quitting cigarettes and getting in shape; that underdog's uncompromising commitment to overcoming low odds and succeeding despite them; that unquenchable thirst for victory that nothing short of giving your all can satisfy, no matter the outcome, "Impossible Dream"-style. My twisted idea of how to do that was a rather simple one prompted by my steady companion, the lizard-brain voice, or, more scientifically speaking, for those so minded, the over-acting *amygdala*, and that was to knock someone out with a single punch, and that's what I was headed to the beach to do. Why? Because I wanted to. Reason enough. Along with my *if I hurt you'll hurt* credo was *if I want to do it - I'm supposed to do it*. So, to the not-so-distant shore I headed. This is a challenging operation for a number of reasons, and by the way, I'm not talking about a fair fight against an evenly matched opponent in the ring. No, that would take more guts and

determination than I was willing to summon, and it wasn't necessary anyway. All that was necessary was a target and an opportunity, which the beach was likely to provide, pretty much like the shot I took in the back of my studio by that Golden Glover, a sucker punch, better to give than receive. The plan was as simple as perverse: recalling my days as a homeless wanderer in downtown LA the year before (Kabbo: Volume I), I knew I could attract a fair number of "cruising" homosexual men who saw me as a target for action, hopefully not of the same type, though one can never be sure, and could parley that type of attention into an action plan of my own design. Follow? So down to the unknown beach on an unknown shore in the dark of the warm Puerto Rican night, I wandered in search of my mark. How did I know that type would be on the prowl down there? I didn't. Maybe I had a *sixth sense* about it—probably just guessing and guessing right—but however it occurred to me, sure enough, there he was, the mark. Not long after arriving and walking along the quiet coast by the water's edge, alert for activity while listening to the waves, from out of the sandy shadows someone approached me—a young guy about my size and my age. Perfect. I knew right away: *the fish took the bait*. The next step on this dangerous and cruel agenda was to put him at ease, gain his confidence, and lead him to believe that we were gonna party like that, the tactic being to isolate him, find someplace where there would be cover, and get him alone before suddenly springing on him in what I imagined would be my triumphant Rocky Balboa moment. At this point, I'm compelled to report that it rarely, if ever, succeeded and occasionally even backfired. More *Lou Costello* than *Italian Stallion*; details to come, but this particular round, though unsuccessful, otherwise went off without a hitch. After strolling along together for a few minutes in "*some enchanted evening*" style amid friendly beach chat, I led the guy to a heavily shaded patch of palm trees and thick shrubbery, where just when he thought he was going to enjoy what he sought, I snapped and popped him as hard as I could right center in the mug. No, it wasn't a knockout, not even a TKO, but it did produce fright on his part and frustration on mine. He quickly turned and ran, but I never gave chase. What for? I had already given him my best unguarded shot, and it came up short; he hadn't really done anything to me other than target me for sodomy of some sort, so there was no reason to go after him, but there was reason to drink more (isn't there always?), which is exactly what I did.

There were still a few hours before dawn and muster, and after that? Only Lord Poseidon knows.

That'll be another half-pint of *Añejo* to go, *por favor*, and now maybe it's time to start figuring out how to get back to base, as by then I had no idea where in the city I was, and before long the time to find out would be upon me. How can we ever expect to get where we're going if we first don't even know where we are or even where we've been? But never mind all that fancy thinking and problem-solving; it's much too complicated. Instead, turn to the trusty voice, *just borrow somebody's car and drive around searching for it. That'll be fun too, and you may even succeed.* Anything's possible in Old San Juan, a place I'd never even heard of before and under these circumstances could never even have imagined, so stealing a car and driving it to base in time for muster didn't seem too far-fetched in that context, and *walla!* Wouldn't you know it? Neptune be praised. Searching the dark, quiet, seashore side streets for unlocked car doors and, better yet, ones with the keys somewhere observable, in not very long, I found an open Volkswagen Beetle with the keys left in the ignition, perfect, except with a stick shift, a *four-on-the-floor* job, which I had no experience with and almost no idea how to work, but hey, *beggars can't be choosers, so why not give it a go?* Besides, it's getting late, and options are dwindling. Starting it was no problem; I just turned the key, and I had the gas pedal, brakes, and steering parts down alright. It's just that stick and clutch thing I didn't know how to work, but I knew it involved some kind of back and forth, left and right, up and down movement, so I tried everything I could think of to get her rolling. Somehow, through a frantic exercise in trial and error, I was able to get it to chug and sputter along a few blocks before smacking it—not too hard, no bent steel or broken glass—into a parked car where she stalled, and I couldn't get her to start back up again, probably flooding the engine, which was when I figured to try something else, like maybe a taxi if I still had enough change. That would solve the problem of not knowing where I was or how to get to where the sailor needed to be in time. The dark was just beginning to fade to early light, and *muster* was literally a command performance, so that's what I did. Luckily, taxis are cheap down there, like most everything else, so when we finally arrived at the gate, moments before the deadline, I reached into my pocket and gave him the last of

Pasqualuccio's expensive twenty, hoping it was enough, and headed speedily, actually running, towards the gangway, where I knew I'd be stopped by the guard and ordered to show my ID before being permitted to board. The clock was ticking, the sun now rising, and *muster* on the upper deck only minutes away, so I hurried towards the guard, angling to get past him without making the required stop, looking to save a few vital seconds, until he blocked my way, demanding I stop, which was his only duty. An imposing young guy about my age, built like a refrigerator dressed up in a sailor suit, intent on doing his job, first blocked and then nearly tackled me physically as I tried to maneuver quickly past him, clearly indicating he would if forced, so I muttered something about being *late* while quickly flashing the stolen ID card at him and said the magic words, whatever they were, "permission to board" something, followed by "permission granted," and made it to the deck with literally only seconds, less than a minute, to spare. The gangway guard that morning, it later turned out, was soon to become one of my best friends in life, a tunnel builder, or "sandhog's" son from the working-class, white-ghetto, rough house neighborhood of Rockaway Beach, New York, by the name of Seaman Jimmy Hickey.

An untimely barroom brawl

More than a few weeks without a brawl made me edgy, like old age was setting in or I was going soft, so a bout of fisticuffs, usually of the drunken, incompetent variety, was beckoning. How I survived them all and avoided the endpoint the line was inching steadily towards is a classic, timeless mystery, never mind the Sphinx. After the pizza car crackup, while laying stunned on the emergency room operating table, I asked the doctor, who was busy stitching me up—my upper lip having been pounded into the steering wheel and my teeth separated from my gums—if there would be a permanent scar. Apparently, some vanity was still intact, and so, with all the bedside manners he had available, he simply answered in the affirmative, "Yes, there would be." Great. Dumb question, anyway, Mr. Handsome. The voice: *So, what's next? I'm scarred. Fuck it. Who cares? My dick still works.* A couple of weeks later, stitches still in place, I managed to instigate

another bar fight in a neighboring town just on the other side of the channel, Island Park, somewhere shady and desolate along the well-trodden nightclub strip, complete with a topless joint and a couple of fancy dance clubs, again finding myself talking trash and starting shit at one of the lower-end dives, my kinda' bar. Not that I hadn't tried the others, like one called *Rumors*, shoes and a dress shirt type of place with an active dance floor. One night in there, rising to the fancy occasion by switching from Budweiser to Heineken, while walking up through a row of tables towards the men's room, as I passed a young lady seated at the close end where we made brief eye contact, at that moment, on an impulse, I bent down and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek before I kept walking. At that point, moments later, her huge boyfriend and a pal of his caught me in the bathroom, suggesting I apologize. Looking up at them from my position at the urinal said, "*I'll apologize to her, but not to you,*" to which, surprisingly enough, they agreed. Later that night, after the apology and a few more beers, all I can recall is being outside the bar, threatening the bouncers "*I'll be back!*" before calling it a night. Someone must have forgotten to alert them to who I was—Scarface's Lon]g Island protege. So, whatever the cause, I was clearly persona non grata there. Who cares? Give me a low-key gin joint with a dartboard and sawdust any day, you can keep the loud, obnoxious lit-up dance floors and strobe lights saloons. The "old man bars," as we called them, had always been favorites, way back since Ryan's in Rockville Center, right below the train station, that let us high schoolers and budding alcoholics drink underage, and where I was always most comfortable with just a small pool table and a jukebox, all the old-time gadgets and gizmos I needed for a festive night out on the town. Now the bar was transformed into a boxing ring, and in the other corner that night was a quiet, Latino chap, also about my age and size, whom I'd seen around Long Beach for months if not years. He musta' been a kitchen worker or something against whom I had nothing, but somehow this night I was either trying out my Rocky technique again or otherwise insulting the muchacho, causing him to feel the need to get up off his barstool and invite me outside to defend his honor with his fists. Outside and on my feet, true to form, drunk as a stupid skunk, I was helpless as he dropped me with a single blow, proving once again not to be any kind of Marciano, Liston, or Barney Ross, more a Barney Fife. Regardless of reality, stitches, and jail time, in my haze of

drunken distortion and lunatic grandiosity, I remained all too willing to keep trying, so there were few surprises. Vaguely, and what was surprising, it seemed he was a gentleman just the same. With his bruised honor now reinstated and my bleeding mouth with the freshly opened stitches now shut, he helped me up off the dusty plaza ground outside the bar's front door to my feet. Or maybe the other barroom spectators did. Yeah, that's right, and they probably said something to him, threatened him on my behalf, I dunno, because now it's clear; just as I was coming to, standing and up off the dirt, we watched him running away, already fifty yards or so gone, into the dark at a full-throttle sprint. Why? I'm still not sure, but almost for certain, it wasn't out of fear of me. Anyhow, the car-crash healing was interrupted as the stitches tore open, and I never bothered to go back to the doctor, too ashamed to confess or even just have to confront myself through exposure to him with how absurdly self-destructive and out-of-control my life was. What can you say? I was on my own, alone, and always treading deep water. Drowning. Life in the fast lane? Life in the drunk lane? Was this any kind of life at all? Booze, broads and brawls? At least when I brawled on board the M.C. Fox, I was sober. I told the Navy back at Nimitz I was gonna be a headache, and I was, so at least I was honest. At least that, right?

A pile of rocks with a snake

At this stage, between hunting for and laying up with ladies, training weekends on board the good ship M.C. Fox, moving and trucking jobs, pizza delivery escapades, and nighttime security work, my off hours would find me partying heavily and mostly in a solo setting. There were only a couple of good lads left, high school friends who were still willing to go out with me, which meant putting up with the kind of risk that nearly always meant. One or two, or three, in my closest circle were still hanging in: Hannibal, Horsehead, and one other long-time close buddy of mine, my bodyguard and partner in crime, from the cursed town of Oceanside (Kabbo: Volume I), Big Richie, with the multi-colored, nylon disco-shirts, bell-bottoms, and Tony Manero haircut, thick dark hair combed back above his hollow dark eyes, 6' 1" or 2", 210 lbs., with an oversized head making

him look bigger and more threatening than he actually was, who to some was known simply as Lurch, but mostly it was better for me to go solo—there was no one to interfere with my plans or blame me for getting them into trouble, as my wildness knew few if any bounds. Big Richie, the half-German, half-Neapolitan, though? He had even fewer bounds than I did and would shortly be serving a prison term before finding any, and by that time, whatever he might have ever had as a mind reasoned by balance was gone. For example, if he wanted something, like, say, a bicycle or a stereo amplifier, he'd just saunter shamelessly into a local department store, like Sears, carrying a huge plumber's wrench (he came from a family of union plumbers, so they were always handy), and just take it right off the showroom floor and saunter casually right out with it, like it was his, like I would with beer cases, only without my style or finesse. He couldn't have cared less. He was taking it. Period. It was now his. Instead, when a security guard or store manager tried confronting him by telling him to drop it or put it back, he'd brandish the heavy iron tool and warn them to back off or he would "*make your head into mashed potatoes*," so he was a good ally to have around for intimidation purposes, and he was always loyal. The guy idolized me because a few years earlier, he watched when, during an out-of-town, many-on-few bar fight, in the midst of the parking lot melee, I ran up behind one of the lead antagonists from the many and snatched the baseball bat he was carrying, just grabbed it out of his hand, and then began swinging it wildly from the center of the crowd, so shifting the tide of battle just enough to our side, the few, to make the decisive difference, a clean getaway. The sudden and risky move so startled the opposition that it bought us enough time to get to our car and make our escape, all in one piece. Anyway, it made a huge impression on Richie, whereas I barely remember any more of the details of the night aside from that and that we were not on home turf; someone on the periphery of our crowd invited us—a friend of a friend type of thing—enticing us with tales of loose women and free weed. None of that do I recall. I do recall that we were outnumbered and under attack in the bar parking lot; the reason, if any, was unclear—maybe someone spilled a drink on someone else, maybe someone made the wrong comment to the wrong girl—the usual barroom *casus belli*, who knows? But fists were flying when I sprung that surprise move, freeing us. It was ballsy, so the impression had a bit of real substance. As for now, the

others? My teenage and childhood pals, former colleagues, dropouts, renegades, and running mates? They were busy growing up; no more time for life-threatening nonsense as routine amusement. Good for them, but as for me? No interest in "growing up" if it meant looking for morning regularity, i.e., settling down for a boring life of middle-class mediocrity. At only twenty, just out of my teens and on my own, there was still too much "*wildness*" (Richie's battle cry) to perform and enjoy. And Long Island, not even Long Beach, was enough cover for me when I decided to really let it rip. My type of partying, with near total abandon, was best enjoyed in the city, Manhattan. There, I could easily blend in among the millions of anonymous denizens and tourists, cops and robbers, and revelry seekers of every race, nationality, and description, and my *wildness* would not stand out so much. In the city, one can easily lose himself among these varied and random, ever-shifting urban crowds.

In the nights of the late seventies, Times Square was as decadent as it was dangerous and, for me, fun, even in the daytime, offering as many readily available vices as a young guy like me could ever dream of or ask for. No one cared. No one batted an eye. "*Loose joints and nickel bags*!" could be heard on the streets, no one bothering to whisper, a mantra repeated over and over outside the old-time movie theaters, which like Long Beach were elegant venues in their day, with balconies and boxes, ornate molding, chandeliers, and carpeting, now dilapidated, unabashed porno houses showing cheap Peter Cushing horror films and Swedish hump movies poorly disguised as documentaries, still very appealing to me in their sordid style and deliciously lascivious ways. Prostitutes, pimps, street gangs, drug dealers, missionaries, Black Panthers, preachers, bogus drug dealers, crazy teenagers, and runaways, all trying hard to blend in and look the part. Tourists and authentic local vagrants colored the scene, like it was their home sweet home and they belonged there. The streets were theirs, and if you didn't like it, easy, just stay out. No one dragged anyone there. But I liked it. I liked it a lot, better than Long Beach. To me, it was a fascinating nightmare, like the dark side of Disneyland: Donald Duck in black sunglasses, with stubble and a Buffalo Bill mustache and a needle in his arm; a strung-out Minnie Mouse with a black eye turning tricks for scraps of cheese and dollar bills tucked into her torn garters; an amusement park of

the macabre, the dirty, the dangerous, and the licentious; these were a few of my favorite things; the real New York's glorious underbelly and the decaying and demoralized grandeur of what was once proudly known as the "crossroads of the world" and the *Great White Way*. Perfect.

The best part of it all was that no one bothered anybody about these uninhibited and exhibitionistic displays, not cops, not travelers, not citizens, and certainly not me, until I did. But before that, though, just gimme a decently rolled joint or two, a couple of Colt 45 tall boys, and a movie ticket, and we're good for hours and hours. So, for hours and hours over months and months and for several years, life was pretty close to exactly what I wanted it to be: a horror show with me as the lead monster. And, as if it wasn't already sinister enough, the darkest side was even blacker and better for hiding, even disappearing, because it had teeth, real teeth, sharp teeth, in a world of bite or be bitten. There were dangers of all sorts, some external, like from cops and robbers, and others from the inside, like paranoia and drunkenness. More than once, at some point, I boozed myself into a "gray-out." As near as could be figured, it had' been while watching some "B"-grade vampire film, a double-header with the usual soft-core, 16mm porno film blown up on a big screen. But darkest of them all? One I could easily relate to, having been locked up in the Kingston, Jamaica, police jail at fifteen; even its musical score was *Midnight Express*, with its dank, dark cavern flooded by shadow, where Billy Hayes clung in desperation to the prisoner's ritual, following the pack, circling around the column in a trance of sublime horror, a waking, walking nightmare, reciting the repetitious, rhythmic chants of the community of doomed inmates roaming in the filth and squalor of the Turkish prison: "Prison, monastery, cloister, cave..." The next thing I know is I'm back in Long Beach, back in my studio bed, apparently still alive and still in one piece, where the last thing I could remember was that medieval Turkish prison, the gap bridged only by the terrifying fact that I had no idea what happened, how exactly I got home, or what I might have done between there then and here now. It was as if the prison and the escape were both integral parts of old Times Square, and that no matter what else, as long as I was still alive, still free, and still breathing, then back in that dungeon, rounding that rancid column

flooded in shadow, I'd again be, sooner rather than later, another unavoidable point on the line.

But let me not paint too bleak a picture. Deep within the *crossroads of the world* habitat, to the wise and knowing, was available this fantastical cheap thrill (and I mean *cheap* and I mean *thrill*): there were these triple X bookstores that hosted in the back, not visible from the main display area in the front but easily accessible to those in the know, these small and enclosed stages, elevated maybe one or two feet above the floor and ten or twelve feet in diameter. The space was large enough for two or three dancers to pose and dance in, surrounded by a paneled, floor-to-ceiling barrier wall. Except for an access door, placed side by side were adjacent, compact, one-person, pitch-dark stalls about the size of a phone booth, covering the entire outer perimeter, each with its own lockable door and stool. At about eye level, there was a small shaded opening, like a window, maybe eight inches wide and ten inches high. For a quarter deposited into the coin slot just beneath the opening, the mechanical pressed board shade would lift and, for the next two or three timed minutes, whatever the quarter bought, there would be nothing between you and the girls, no physical barrier of any kind, not a stitch of clothing either, not a G-string or a pasty, nothing, so not only could you see them up close, but as soon as a window opened, the girls would *come hither*, approach the opening, and, for the princely sum of an entire dollar, position themselves close enough so that any part of their flesh you wanted was now available for handling, caressing, probing, or just up-close and personal eyeballing, maybe two or three in there on-duty at the same time, usually enough for every lucky customer, gyrating and jiggling to the pumped up disco hit of the week, *Fly Robin Fly* or *I Feel Love*. Imagine a compact space full of young, nude women, posing, rotating from window to window, seducing and teasing you with their totally exposed and now physically accessible charms. Almost all the *adult bookstores* and strip bars had them somewhere in the backs or on the upper floors: a living, breathing, sweating, glistening peep show. It was unbelievable. Talk about instant gratification? It doesn't get much more instant or much more gratifying than that, not in my life, not for a dollar, grabbing yourself a handful of this or that and fondling the intimate female flesh for a minute or two, all for less than the price of a 16-oz. Colt 45. The

apertures were only large enough to see and feel the “dancers” through, while the viewing booth itself was totally dark, so they couldn’t really see you or you see the other spectators, just maybe your hands and, of course, the bills. Not that anyone was looking, so the setup offered the patron privacy and none of that awkward eye contact that could be inhibiting. It was designed to be as private for the customers as it was revealing for the girls. Beyond that, the customers had no pride, and the girls had no shame, so it was a perfect match. Taken as a whole, that kind of immediate access to what was most prized and sought after made working for it any other way seem absurdly expensive and time consuming. It was third base right off the plate, and if you wanted a home run, you could just wait for her to get off; there was no need to even swing, just pay to play. Why bother dating, spending all kinds of money, and talking endlessly on the phone about things you have no real interest in if a handful of female flesh is what you are mainly after? How these women didn’t mind is another mystery; sometimes filthy men with their fat, grubby fingers in their most private places, some even seemed to enjoy the thrill of decadent exhibitionism. Their pleasure, or lack thereof, was not much of a consideration, none at all, at least not for me; only the opportunity, the handful of quarters, and getting those dollar bills out of my pocket fast enough were. Usually, though, rather than satisfying me, the exercise would only get me more agitated. By the time I left the booth, with every exchange, I was so worked up and ignited with feverish desire that the hunger only grew deeper and my soul felt emptier, almost painful, and so, ironically, now work demanded to be done. Work on the streets. At that point, vision blurry, slightly dizzy, and mouth dry, it was time to hit the precarious back alleys and shadowed canyons of nearby Hell’s Kitchen, where and when, like up on the boardwalk, the predatory prowling would commence. As the wise old man of yore once observed of a young man’s randiness, “*he would fuck a pile of rocks if he thought there was a snake in it,*” so off into the night in search of a pile of rocks he went.

Someone’s in the bedroom with Ginger

Hell’s Kitchen earned its name by being pretty much just that, an overcrowded, run-down, low-skilled, laboring immigrant’s strong hold, mostly

longshoremen and their Irish or Italian families, big families, big hungry families with too many kids, fighting over a day’s pay at the local piers and the necessary scraps of this and that just to sustain life and the local gangster clans that preyed on them, the shippers, and anyone else who stepped into their lair, a merciless cauldron of despair mixed with hope, glad to be in America but desperate to find the good life here, the “dream”, but through unskilled manual labor? Not very likely, but there they were, right off the boats themselves, often both supporting and preying on one another, giving rise to opportunities in the straight world side by side with the dangers of the underworld, the worst of the worst, as well as the others, the cream of the proletariat rising to the top, cops, tradesmen, firemen, teachers, business owners, and professionals. By the second or third generation, most of them climbed out of there and were off to the suburbs, where *the American dream*, a life of dignity and opportunity supported by the rule of law, became, for the most part, a reality.

But this isn’t that story. By the seventies, most of the piers had shut down, and shipping moved over to the Jersey side of the Hudson, down by the narrows, gutting the neighborhood’s lifeblood and changing the character almost entirely. Still, though, there was the decay, the poverty, the violence, the rats, the garbage, and the crime that lingered long after most of the Irish and Italian laborers moved on up and out, leaving behind a dwindling community of still-struggling people from the older generations, slow to work themselves out or otherwise reluctant to leave the familiar neighborhood they adapted to long ago, despite the changing times and population. That group had largely been replaced by hard-working Puerto Rican families, but the neighborhood was still plagued with low-end criminals, drug dealers, perverts, street gangs like the *Vampires*, and vicious outlaw predators like the *Westies*. In other words, I liked it—not to live in, but definitely to visit—especially for a *walk on the wild side*. It was easy to carry on there and prowl about without attracting much attention, unless I chose to, and the moment I spotted her, radar zeroed in; yeah, that’s when I chose to.

Wow. It was around nine or ten o’clock on a Saturday night, maybe only a half hour, if that, since I’d had my fill at the live peep show in the round, dressed fairly well in springtime leisure wear, new shoes, pressed slacks,

and a recent haircut type of look, when this literally stunning beauty with an hourglass figure that couldn't even be fully comprehended emerged from the darkness and appeared to be heading eastward towards Times Square. Up until that moment, I was fully focused on the trail toward the river and its assorted denizens. As we crossed paths, I caught the scent of pure estrogen and turned my head to follow her stride, staring, momentarily mute, with my eyes riveted on her next ten or so paces, now refocusing on the rear view. That was it. Sold! "*You look like a million dollars on legs,*" I suddenly erupted, using the urgent tone of my most boyish charm, prompting her to turn around, look back, and smile briefly before continuing on, hips swaying, cheeks jiggling, mesmerizing, which was all the encouragement I needed to double time quick, catch up, and take my now sanctioned place alongside my newly discovered, ever so slightly taller in spiked heels and nylons, quarry. She too was dressed for a springtime Saturday night: a bright strapless dress, clinging skin tight, accentuating those remarkable curves—the tiny waist and fulsome derriere; her auburn hair all done up; a movie-star face, with full lips, high cheekbones, and big dark eyes. With a quiet, hushed tone that I heard as gentle elegance, she told me she was heading to a dance club in the heart of the Square to meet her date, but that we could hang around together and keep company until he showed up, then I'd have to split, but before that, she'd give me her number and we could catch up more fully another time. Sold again, fine with me; a genuine offer I couldn't refuse. At that, I was so stuck to her, nothing short of a sharp "*Get lost, sonny*" accompanied by a meaningful threat, would have dissuaded me, but only somewhat; one step back, two steps forward, persistence counts. So until then, and for now, she was all mine.

After a short walk—maybe ten or fifteen minutes—we arrived at the club, which was quite another eyeful—no old-man bar with sawdust and dart boards; it was more like another planet. The place was packed, maybe two hundred or more guests, happy party people greeting her, full tables, free standing chairs, a packed balcony with more tables and a dance floor alive with fancy dancing couples, practically the Count Basie Orchestra on stage with brass, drums, horns, strings, and a piano playing big-band music, not rock'n'roll or disco happy crap, but high-energy dance music from the Forties, swing, Benny Goodman, Ellington and Dorsey; *Sing Sing Sing* and

the folks swung, swung, swung. It was impressive—the talent, the energy, the spinning lights, the furnishings, the décor, the sound, the crowd, and nothing like the dingy dives I was ordinarily drawn to; I mean, it was *the city*. She led me to one of the corner tables on the upper tier floor in the back with a commanding but discrete view of the main floor and the door and sat us on its cushioned sofa lounge, from where we'd have some privacy while she kept an eye on the door for her date. As she focused that way, I focused on her, looking for an opening to get things started before he arrived. At just the right moment, as her left thigh was brushing my right, I began kissing her shoulder and neck, then gently began tugging down the straps of her dress, exposing, caressing, and then kissing the closest breast, becoming very familiar with both of them, which were as lovely, soft, warm, firm, and perfumed as expected. That went on for a little while until, after five or ten minutes, as promised, here comes Mr. Handsome, her date. A tall, well-built young guy steps onto the scene and, weirdly enough, is wearing the same kind of classic sailor suit—the Cracker Jack box style one that I had—except his was white cotton while mine was navy blue wool. At that point, already having handed me a napkin with an address, she tugged up her top, gave my hand a final squeeze, got up, and left me to cross the crowded venue and greet him at the door, which was my agreed-upon exit cue, and though I got up and began walking towards the exit, there were so many other women, many looking like they were ogling me, friendly, suggestive, bold, and beckoning, that I couldn't quite get myself out the door, at least not right away. After all, the band was hot, my pockets were full, and the night was still young and still promising. So far, so good. The two of them, though? They went right to the dance floor and began jitterbugging, swinging fast and furious to the frantic rhythms and great sounds. It was another eyeful, as they made for a captivating couple, really cutting that rug together well, like a professional dance team, so, rather than creating any kind of awkward moment, I eventually managed to tear myself away from further temptation, not wanting to ruin my chances for the second act, and out the door, making it back onto 43rd or 44th and Seventh, I went. Just as I exited, now solo again, the two huge, white dudes, bouncers in black suits, looked at each other and then at me before one of them asked, "*You know who you were with?*" I'm not sure how I responded. (*Huh? Yeah? So? Who? What?*) But the next comment came at

me from out of nowhere, “that was Ginger Rod, *a man*,” laughed the other one, “they’re mostly all men in there, it’s a *drag club*.” What *club*? Drag? Drag what? It didn’t look like any kind of *drag* to me at all, it looked like wild fun. Which I laughed off too, like I was in on the joke, thinking they were just busting my chops since I was a lot younger than most of the other guests and a rube from the suburbs in their eyes, so an easy mark for a clumsy joke. They were laughing with each other and kinda’ at me, so it musta’ been some kind of joke. *Right?* What else? Men don’t have hourglass figures; men don’t have tits. That was no man. *Ha! Ha! Ha!* Crazy. Unbelievable. Stupid joke. And anyway, I had that scribbled note with her Hell’s Kitchen address and still had plenty of quarters and singles so off I went. It was early in the warm springtime night, and the party night was still young. “A man?” *I thought*. Your sister’s flat ass is *a man*. *Ha fucken ha*, that. *A man*.

USS MC Fox DD-829, the floating prison

This was it. The weekend drills before this were all one or two days and nights at sea, but this was going to be the real deal—almost two full weeks—time enough to get my sea legs in ship shape, as they say. That’s how long it takes to slow-sail a destroyer from Puerto Rico to the New York Harbor, and for that I was super-psyched. This drill, on board, there would be no liberty. There would be work details, watch details, general quarters, even a turn at the helm, training exercises the whole trip. Yes, on the bridge, steering the ship in the presence of the captain and executive officers. I had no idea how to pull that off, but it was going to happen regardless of my preparedness or lack thereof. That’s the cool thing about the military: there’s no “I can’t,” which is great, especially for a guy like me who needed that kind of push, like back at Nimitz on the running track, so when the time came, I’d have to manage somehow. If war fighting is your mission and defeat is unacceptable, then there’s only one other direction available: “I must” so “I can.”

Before all that, and aside from Pasqualuccio the neighborhood loan shark, there were some pretty cool guys on board: shipmates, fellow weekend

warriors, and even a few of the steady crew, though they didn’t mix much with us. There were a few jerkoffs too. One of them, another lowly seaman named Alversa, was a huge full-timer, a ton of light-haired, northern Italian *merde*, who out of nowhere suddenly punched me in the head. We were below deck at the time, in the berthing by the hammocks, no witnesses; no reason either; he just didn’t like me, reason enough, it happens. At the moment I was low on options, so I let him get away with it; trading shots with a beast that size would be foolish, so I just looked at him like *that’s all you got? A big fuck like you?* Option one would be strike back as best as I could right now and give him an excuse to buy me a fast trip to the infirmary; or, option two, I woulda’ had to hurt him badly, or try to, upping the ante like that, another bad choice; no “win” there either, buying myself a slow trip to the stockade. Big as he was, he coulda’ easily pummeled me into the bulkhead, and though it was a solid shot, except to my pride there was no damage from the blow; it barely stung me, but his account was now open. Option three: I’d wait until a good, clean shot comes my way and the odds shift, as they almost always do in one form or another; patience is a virtue, and then balance the score.

One thing nearly everyone had in common—speaking of the full-timers, that is—was that they were all “doing time” in the Navy. Whenever you meet a new shipmate, the first subject that gets brought up is how long he’s been in and how much longer ‘till he gets out. That was the first information exchanged, setting the context for understanding where we were at in life. Except for a few, like the red-haired guy with the ropes, no one seemed too happy to be there, either in the institution itself or particularly *underway*. It’s a tense environment, with no females to provide pleasant distraction or relief, and not much recreation—no shuffleboard or swimming pools on deck—just a collection of bored, angry and frustrated sailors constantly navigating tight, unyielding spaces. Moving about on the boat involved navigating through narrow passageways, narrower hatches, lots of vertical iron ladders to climb and descend, and lateral lines of hungry sailors that included the ladders to stand and wait on. The lines assembled at least three times a day for meals—long lines that moved slowly, and almost everyone was almost always in each other’s way, it seemed. But for me, this was kind of a lark, a novelty, the fulfillment of a fantasy dream ever

since the *Pequod* (see Kabbo: Volume I), so I didn't let it stress me too much until after a week or so, when the tension got to me and I did, which I'll get to later. Anyway, down below, somewhere in the hull, where we slept, there was barely enough space to get past each other just entering or exiting the crowded locker room with swinging hammocks stacked one on top of the other, three at a time. Lying in your hammock was the only place you could peacefully exist without being challenged for space. Forget about any privacy. The near-constant work assignments, now that my billet was busy, only added to the strain because if you happened to have back-to-back details or back-to-back-to-back details and couldn't sleep, well, you couldn't sleep. How you're supposed to stand watches and stay alert while you can't even keep your eyes open was never explained, but woe unto any sailor caught sleeping at his post, it's a chargeable offense under the UCMJ. Add to that the constant rocking back and forth, the ever present motion of the ocean and the boredom of down time at sea, life on a US Navy destroyer was just plain difficult.

None of that is to say there wasn't some very cool stuff happening as well, because there most definitely was. Take a simple example: standing watch. There are at least two concurrent and complementary posts, both on the 'uppermost deck, one facing forward, the other naturally aft, front and back views, both watchmen scanning one-eighty, port to starboard covering the whole three-sixty, and the shift is a few hours, usually no more than four; I'm not sure exactly how long, but you can't keep staring out into a mostly empty ocean for too long before your eyes and mind start playing tricks on you and you start imagining things. You have to stay sharp, so there is a limit. Each sailor gets a pair of binoculars and a two-way radio with headphones and a mic to communicate with the bridge and each other and report anytime they spot something other than the endless ocean, birds, or fish. For anything out of the ordinary, like mainly other ships or perhaps even the *Great White Whale*, they teach you how to pinpoint their locations by thinking of the ship as located in the center of a circle or a clock face, using degrees or numbers as in hours for direction, assuming the bow is always at twelve o'clock, and using the thickness of your fingers to measure the distance inward from the horizon towards the center. Pretty easy and pretty cool—not that I saw much, but what I did see, like schools of leaping,

silvery-flying fish and squawking gulls miles and days from any shore, was pretty cool. (Where did the birds land?) The whole scene was pretty wild for a Brooklyn city boy who had never even seen a fish outside of an upstate lake, an aquarium or a dinner table. Yes, there was the cruise to the Bahamas our parents took us on, my kid sister and me back when we were small kids, that's maybe where I got my first taste, but this was a whole 'nother experience. This was not the *Holland America Cruise Line*, a luxury ship or a summer camp rowboat. This was the United States Navy and a warship.

There was a lot of ocean and sky out there, that's for sure—more than I could ever imagine. It's really something, the endless lifting and dipping of the boat, rocking back and forth, again and again, over and over, the vastness of the sea, for days and days, nothing but the forever ocean and endless sky, in every direction, wide and deep, the life below, miles down into the silent abyss, another world, the darkness just below the surface, below even consciousness. There I imagined enormous leviathans, microscopic protozoa, and the mighty Megalodon, electric eels and barracuda, now ancient remnants of the moments just after creation, eons before Moses, Caesar or Jesus, who knew none of us. They knew none of us, with all our power, discipline, armor and big guns, so small, so limited, so finite, a fleeting speck of frenetic energy before vanishing into dust, so very temporal, so very self-centered and conceived as if the entire universe was created just for us, the center of it, made in G-d's image, in our little boat, rising and falling with the waves, mirroring the endless rhythms of eternity.

Then, of course, the coolest, coolest, and baddest of them all was the general quarters drill, or what used to be called "battle stations," where we go and what we do when we fight, engage the enemy, as in a war, or in this case, practice for war, targeting that island off the main one near Puerto Rico, Vieques, the reason none of the locals smiled when we ported dockside. They weren't too pleased about being so close to the designated target practice zone. Hey, at least we were there to defend them too, if need be. Cuba wouldn't be invading any time soon, that's for sure. Anyway, I was ordered to the gun mounts, the interior working space of the huge Mark 12

5"/38 caliber guns, to fire live shells from inside the gun below deck. It takes the team of three gunners below just to load the shells and get rid of the spent, steaming-hot shell casings, which are about the size of an ordinary fireplace log made from brass, copper, or some such alloy, but as I said, they are hot, smoky, and burning from the heat of the fired shell. The case is the part of the ammunition where the gunpowder is stored and ignited, so after firing, the spent case remains in the barrel and must be disposed of to make room for the next. My role, as instructed, was *"hot case man."* On radio command from the gunner's mate up above, acting on command from the captain or first officer, the ammunition, both parts, shell and case, are sent up from storage below on a hydraulic lift to a stationary platform where they are received and carried, then cradled snugly in the open chamber at the rear end of the barrel—one man the case, the other, the shell—loading them into the big gun. They sent me down there with zero experience, to *pop my cherry*; I had never even seen this kind of operation before, not even in a movie. It was all new to me, and apparently that was the point of the drill—training us with live fire before actual combat, especially necessary for inexperienced swabbies like me—another "I must" so "I can" event. The other two sailors, middle-aged black dudes, were seasoned; one was a regular crew member and his buddy another a reservist like me. They were wearing sound-muffling headphones and handed me an old pair that didn't fit along with two thick, battered, and burned but otherwise intact fingerless asbestos mittens that extended up your arm all the way to the elbow. They explained that when the gun is fired, the empty case, still literally smoking hot, will eject from the rear of the barrel, and my job is to "smack it down" so that it doesn't slam into and damage the bulkhead behind us, then kick it down the hatch right below the rear of the barrel, an opening designed for just that purpose. I'm like, *"Aye, aye, maties,"* but before the gun goes off the first time, *situational awareness* let's call it, I check the wall, maybe three or four feet from the rear of the barrel where the shell will be ejected, and I see that it already has plenty of chip marks and scrapes from where the shell hit the wall before landing on the floor without any human interference. That's what they don't want to happen, but I can judge how much force there must be from ejecting these flying, burning hot copper cases to have battered the steel surface like that. There were no real dents, but definitely a lot of deep scrapes in the steel and

gashes of chipped paint, enough to give me pause and have serious doubts about the plan, the voice figuring, let's see this once or twice on its own before trying to smack these sizzling metal tubes down in midair and get a sense of the speed and trajectory. No use getting injured, even disabled here on my first try, right? Right. At least for now, it was more like an "I'll do the best I can" than an "I can't, so I won't." Next thing you know, there's a warning beep-beep sound coming from a speaker somewhere meant to alert us, and then two or three seconds later, cannon loaded and it's **kaBOOM!!!** An explosion, an intense one, a lot louder than my peashooter .22 in the hallway, and that was damn near deafening. This was a war machine, not a sawed-off, small-caliber hunting rifle or even a high-powered .350 with a cool scope. The whole interior of the gun mount fills with smoke and burning gunpowder, damn near choking me, and one or two seconds after that, *kaPLANK!* The smoking hot, spent, ejected shell comes flying out of the rear of the barrel at a speed and force you don't want to be in the way of. Seriously. Now, I'm thinking like, *what? Smack that down in midair? Are you joking? I'm sorry. Not this time. No. This time I'll let it hit the wall, bulkhead, whatever, as many others obviously had, and then kick it down the hatch so it gets outa' here where we don't want it to be. Okay?* Of course, they couldn't really have expected me to try that sight unseen. That would have been needlessly and stupidly reckless. You could lose an arm if you don't time it just right, and how're you gonna do that until you get a much better sense of it by watching it again and again, until you get the timing and over the shock of the explosion you're actually in the center of? Imagine being an ant in an empty chamber of .38 when a round is fired. In any case, and at any pace, that's a steep and dangerous learning curve and not a risk worth taking at this point. Okay, right? Luckily, they went along with me, probably just wanting to see how reckless and eager to please I might be, or stupid, or whatever. I mean, just doing it this way, firing at that island for practice, was both exhilarating and, at the same time, seriously alarming. Adrenaline City. But during an actual conflict? I don't know, fellas; all I can honestly say is thank Neptune's trident—it ain't. There's little more I'd rather avoid than having to be brave, and the real action would be terrifying, I'm quite certain, getting fired back at, maybe hit, a destroyer is a large and slow moving target, so let's leave brave for the heroes, bless them. *I'm just living out a fantasy. See?* But still, even with all that

dangerous drama, it was still pretty damn cool, unforgettable just as it was, firing shell after shell, gradually getting a little used to the overpowering sound, the intensity of the choking gunpowder smell, the explosive violence, force and timing. Maybe next time I'll try to "smack it down" in mid-flight. We'll see. Then again, it didn't seem all that necessary. Chipped paint is a regular feature of life on a boat; no big deal. But getting my arm broke so there's not another ding in the existing dinged up bulkhead's collection? That's a bad deal, at least as far as me and my unbroken arm are concerned, so probably not. I mean, if "I must," then "I will," but it didn't really look like I had to. At least not for today, mates.

There was more to come, cool stuff, before the trouble started, real trouble, and I'll get to that in a bit, but first, back to the city, the streets, after I left the other high-energy scene, the club where the drag queens wanted me and bouncers warned me. You don't have to be in a war or practicing for one to get injured. A guy like me can even make that happen under much more ordinary circumstances of his own design, like trying to knock out a stranger with a single punch in Times Square.

War on the streets, tough times in Times Square

After leaving the club, exhilarated but frustrated, and having spent the rest of my quarters and singles on peep shows and beer bottles, it was now getting late, well after normal people are at home in bed, so I decided to go cruising for another mark, or better yet, make myself available and wait for one to come cruising for me, and, as they say, a bruising too. Sure enough, not too long after, maybe twenty minutes later, an older white dude, probably in his forties or fifties, a panhandlin' skid-row bum type of fella, approaches me somewhere off the Square, on the outskirts of the Kitchen, on Eighth Avenue, peep shows and strip bars paradise found, looking for a handout, spare change for the next half-pint. Got it. Perfect. "*Spare change? Why certainly, sir, step right this way,*" and with that, I began the routine of taking the lead and scouring the darker alleyways off the Great White Way. He's following me as I implied I'd have "spare change" aplenty for him. After a short time, *busy, busy, busy*—less than five minutes—and

needing to keep him with me, I found one that'll do. Tucked in shadow between theaters, dark and narrow and deep, litter strewn about, cluttered with rats, dumpsters, and discarded construction debris, lead him into its darkest recesses where I jumped to stage two, turning suddenly around and you guessed it, popping him one smack in the mug, his jaw. **KaPOW!** He goes down, lands on his ass, but is not even close to being knocked out unconscious, just startled, a little frightened, and very angry. He scrambles up and scampers away without even looking back, so we were done in my book, chalking up another failure, and decided to forget it for tonight and instead of pursuing him or finding another target, head back to the Square for more action of vague description. Maybe hookers.

The next thing you know, I'm chatting it up with two dark-skinned and long-lashed professional ladies of the night, just goofing around with them, talking about their overstated wigs, black chicks with thick, fake red-blond hair, and understated micro-mini skirts, black chicks with real African asses, the full street hooker ensemble, chit-chatting and friendly small talk on the quiet 4 a.m. Gotham City street. I had no budget left for anything like that action, or even much desire for it either; preferring the real thing, of which there was plenty available if I was just willing to put in the time and work, which I generally wasn't, besides, it never ends well. With hookers, when I know they're only joining me for the sake of being paid, with no fire or love light in their eyes, then it's not a conquest, it's a charade, and not a terribly convincing one either, more like awkward. But I didn't mind ogling them and goofing around again because, well, who really knows what might happen? It's definitely fun, and I might even change my mind. It's happened. Anyhow, during the lighthearted banter, pretty much in the center of the *crossroads of the world*, one of them suddenly changes her expression from friendly laughter to one that seems more like a touch of dread, which I belatedly took as a warning. She's looking over my shoulder at something behind me, but before I can turn around to investigate, **BAM!** right to my temple. The stunning, surprise blow caused me to buckle a bit at the knees and momentarily stagger. A few seconds later, after lifting my hand to feel where the blow landed and check for blood, there was none, so I stood up to see them pointing at the assailant. Guess who? Of course, the old dude followed me for what musta' been like a half hour, waiting for his payback.

He picked up some kind of metal object—I'm thinking a wrench or short pipe—and gave me a shot from behind with all his force. Now, dropping the makeshift weapon, he was high-speed running away but still in sight, so I took off after him. At least I had the courtesy to hit him face-to-face. *How dare he?* After a short two- or three-minute run and a few blocks of chasing, now gaining on him and only about twenty-five yards ahead of me, he bolts into the back of the New York Times building on 40th or 41st, where the loading bays and delivery trucks are being packed and readied for the morning runs. All the workmen could see was me chasing this worn-out looking, breathless older dude, so they jumped in to keep me away from him, physically blocking me and providing him sanctuary and protection, never to be seen again by this failed Hebrew Hammer. And that's when things went blank.

"There's got to be a morning after, if we can hold on through the night..."
– The Morning After, Al Kasha, Joel Hirschhorn (1972)

The next morning, when I woke up on a couch in an apartment nearby, on the edge of the Kitchen, with a golf ball-sized lump on my head, hungover and fully clothed, but nothing left in my pockets except a train ticket and the scribbled note, I felt more dead than alive. I'm not sure why my karma wasn't worse with this class of folks, but it looked like I was not only still alive but momentarily safe in the place of two young gay guys, maybe just a few years older than I, who told me they saw me stumbling around, drunk and aimless, and out of some kind of charity, the kindness of strangers, as Blanch Dubois described it, pulled me into their taxi and brought me back to their apartment, where they put me on the couch to sleep it off. I guess that's what probably did happen because there was no evidence of anything contrary or anything else to fill in the blanks with. That said, I got much better treatment than I deserved back then, from them and from just about the entire rest of the world. After thanking them and making my exit quickly, I took my sick, frightened, and once again remorseful self back to my own sanctuary in America's Healthiest City for another one of those routine "I'm never gonna drink again" vows, the ones that usually expire by early

nightfall that same day. *How long can this go on?* I wondered, *how long before my luck runs completely out?*

At the helm

The pivot point on the good ship MC Fox probably came at the helm. Yup, that was the day my billet was assigned to the bridge, where as soon as I reported for duty, the Quartermaster ordered me to man the helm. Never mind that this sailor had exactly zero idea of how to work this thing, the big wooden wheel, or what any of the terms meant, let alone how to steer a ship. My only experience navigating in the water up to that point was with rowboats, kayaks, and canoes, mostly in lakes and rivers. Those could be readily handled, even in whitewater and waves, but this wasn't no rowboat, kayak, or canoe, that's for sure. This was a sea monster. On the bridge, there were about seven or eight sailors, including the captain, the first officer, the quartermaster, or boatswain, and three or four crew members, each with a very specific function. There are no spectators or miscellaneous *swabbies* just passing through. We'd been *underway* for a number of days by then, maybe a week, so I was beginning to recognize faces and be recognized as well, not for anything particularly noteworthy; it's just that in such a relatively small and mostly enclosed space, well, you kind of run into the same faces at different points again and again, like the red-headed guy hoisting those huge rubber bumpers, fuckface Alversa, and skinny Guinea Pasqualuccio, the friendly shipboard loan shark. Being recognized by the captain, though, was definitely not something to be sought, but after this minor fiasco, it was going to be a lot harder to keep entirely below his radar.

On the bridge, there's a strict chain of command. It's a very formal environment, as one might imagine. The captain gives the order to the first officer, who gives it to the quartermaster, and so on down the chain of command to the guy on the bottom rung, who happens to be the guy standing at the helm with his hands on the big wooden wheel like it was an automobile, at 22:00 and 14:00 hours, but with no idea whatever to do with it, who happened to be me. You can hear everything that's being said, but you are only supposed to respond to the sailor who is directly giving you the

passed-down order. And whatever he told me, as in instructions on how and when to move that sacred wheel, well, it might as well have been in Chinese because I had no clue what any of it meant. But not responding at all is not an option either. That would be technically disobeying an order, which is obviously a lot worse than trying to figure it out and getting it wrong, so that's what I did. "I must," so "I tried." The sailor said something that sounded like *"thirty degrees rudder port side,"* so I just started moving the wheel one way, to the left, port, which was not at all what he meant, so he repeated it, this time louder and more forcefully, directly in my ear, now changing direction, starboard, but still getting it wrong and still moving the wheel, changing direction again and again in hopes that somehow, by trying everything, like the monkey at the typewriter, I would eventually get it right. There really were only two. Next thing you know, the boatswain joins him, yelling the same thing in my other ear, now in stereophonic bombast, yelling the commands again and again while I'm trying to gauge what they're saying against what I'm doing by how loud and intense the shouts are. The more intense, the more wrong it must be, so I change it up, turn it the other way, but they keep yelling, not giving up. They weren't going to fire me or give me a pass; they were going to learn me. Period. That's the cool thing about the military; like I said before, back on the Nimitz running track where I was having trouble (See Kabbo: Volume I), shin splints, the navy not letting me slide, and that company Phys Ed officer getting behind me, literally, snarling, barking, encouraging, and never letting go until, lo and behold, I somehow found the missing drive inside and made it. That's what they were doing here too—getting my mind right, Cool Hand Luke-style. And none of this is escaping anyone's attention on the bridge either. How could it? It's not a very large space; in fact, it's fairly tight; you can almost hear everyone breathe. Now, I probably wasn't the first sailor to be inept; it's everybody's first time at some point, but this was bordering on ridiculous. Despite that, the yelling continued, and I kept trying, eventually guessing correctly, and they calmed down a bit. That is, until the next order, when the whole drama would repeat itself until my shift was done, maybe like an hour, a very, very long hour. Later, I was told, as if all that drama wasn't enough, that at that exact moment, we just so happened to be sailing through the legendary Bermuda Triangle. Poseidon be praised, I didn't sink the ship, nor collide with any iceberg or submarine, but now the captain

knew who I was. Not good. I saw him glancing my way at the spectacle of the yelling sailors on my case, and he was probably wondering how such an incompetent nincompoop could have ever found his way onto this man's navy, the bridge of a destroyer, yet at the same time, it was easy to see he was nobody's fool and certainly not mine. Soon enough, that would become a lot clearer than the commands at the helm were.

"Well, I'm not dumb but I can't understand why she walked like a woman but talked like a man, oh my Lola" – Lola, The Kinks (1970)

About two weeks after the Times Square tussle and nearly gettin' my head broke, once the swelling went down, both the hunger and the confidence returned, so it was time to head back. There was a date to be kept with that foxy lady, whose strapless dress was so easy to slip down before starting my very public feast on her suddenly and gloriously revealed charms. The address on the scrap she wrote it on was kept safe so it would not get lost or damaged, knowing it would probably need to be presented for her to remember me by and where we left off. She probably got a lot of attention like that all the time, so there was no reason to take any chances and risk failure, especially after the price I paid for my fun later that night, a steep investment in radical debauchery. With that, I headed back to the city and Hell's Kitchen to the tenement walkup on the note. Truth is, aside from being powerfully attracted to her, curiosity about what the bouncers said also drove me. Where would a joke like that ever even come from? Could it be, in fact, not a joke but, in some crazy world, true? The other ladies in the club, all those well-dressed and fancy dolls beckoning me? They did seem a helluva' lot bolder and more forward than most (but not all) others I'd encountered up to that point, charming as I could be, and that by itself lent the scene to some vague suspicion, but men? Naaa.... If those were men, then I'm Rocky Balboa.

Knock! Knock! *Who's there? It's the wolf!* The door opens a few inches but is still locked with a bolt and chain, allowing the occupant inside to see who is outside before maybe unlocking it. It was a rough neighborhood, typical Hell's Kitchen, right in its center, with all the associated street crime,

thieves, robbers, dopers, hookers, knaves, and conmen, so there was no reason for unwarranted risk, and a reasonable amount of caution was expected. Despite the narrow opening, I could see that it was she, recognizable even without the makeup and dress, draped only by a white wrap-around towel, so I put my hand through the space between the door panel and the lock, holding open the note, unfolded and facing out, and with that, I hoped to be recognized. Unlocking the door, she quickly turned her back to me. Not a word was spoken. The note did all the communicating necessary. Still wearing only the towel tightly over that hourglass figure, she headed straight down the narrow hallway to the rear bedroom, with me following close behind, heart racing, feasting on those curves and that scent. There, she lies face down on the bed, and I follow suit by lying face down right on top of her, where nature took its usual course, I guess. All I can report is that yes, there was penetration, complete and total, and it ended with the eruption in the standard, natural way. During the frenzied encounter, I tried a few times to reach around under her belly to find out for myself if the joke had any substance to it beyond being simply a bizarre myth, but she kept shifting and fidgeting to keep me from the target zone, and I wasn't really trying too hard anyway, because at that point, that pile of rocks clearly had a snake in it, and that was all that really mattered just then. And the snake felt as great as any warm-blooded, breathing thing should. There was nothing cold-blooded about this, if anything quite the opposite. It was hot. Quite hot. Frenzied and crazed hot. Then, just after the peak was reached, half a moment later, seemingly out of nowhere, another character entered the dimly lit bedroom, a character not at all thrilled to see me. This was another mystery guest, clearly not quite a man and not quite a woman, a few shades darker and a bit younger and smaller than my lovely snake. But now, mission accomplished, as much interest as I ever had in it, discovery-wise, and lust satisfied, I wasn't interested in sticking around any longer to puzzle out any more mysteries, so, still without a word exchanged between any of the three of us, I slipped my clothes back on and said a quick, polite farewell before making my exit as abruptly as my entrance and what followed. It was really just like that: 1, 2, 3, and the bouncer's joke remained just that: a joke, but either way, joke or not a joke, dick or not a dick, that was one unique encounter, and with that, I'm glad I did it but

never looked to repeat it. It was the fast start and quick end of that sort of exploration.

In this corner: fight mates take positions.

Two salty sailing men competed for my *best friend* status, as expressed by the guys wanting to be my sparring partners. It happened in jail too. Not sure why, but I had this fortunate/unfortunate ability to look like I could take a punch and keep on ticking like the Timex ad and also throw a mean fist of my own given the chance. They saw a short man with a hard look, standing less than five and a half feet tall, with short but muscular arms and legs and a solid trunk, which meant they were usually right. Also, and despite that, perhaps most importantly, I wasn't gonna be too much competition for these semi-pro pugilists either, but whatever, there wasn't much choice packed into the offer. I wasn't gonna back down, and they weren't out to really hurt me—at least not badly. Also, truth be told, I kinda' liked it too. Punching, that is, launching painful punishment shots; being punched, on the other hand, is something I can avoid, but it doesn't quite work that way. The object is to avoid one while delivering the other, but I was almost always outmatched. I mean, they picked me; I didn't choose them, so that was packed into the plan, taking many while giving just a few, and right from the gate.

LaCurta, a classic type straight out of a 1940s B movie, whose family owned a Brooklyn grocery store, uncannily resembled the Rock, sorta' cro magnon-like, as in Rocky Marciano, no disrespect intended, none, the world's only undefeated heavyweight champion and a gentleman. *Uncanny* because, guess what? He was a boxer too, a semi-pro, a middleweight, probably about 5' 9" and 175 lbs., and guess what else? *Yup*. He chose me to be his sparring partner, an honor I'd just as soon have passed on given the opportunity, but backing down on a challenge or opportunity like that, especially in front of the other sailors, was hardly an option, and also, like I said, I kinda' liked it too, fighting, even though too often, at barely 145 lbs., but not always, I got the worse end. This would be more of a sporting challenge than an actual fight, not like with that big, 200-plus-lb. red-necked

douche bag below. That was gonna get ugly and for real when the time came, or better yet, maybe I'd just write it off, *give some take some*. No good choices there either. Still, I was just waiting for my opportunity, like the Hindu/Buddhists suggest, "karma," and the Walrus, "*instant karma's gonna get you, gonna knock you right in the head, better get yourself together darlin', pretty soon you're gonna be dead.*" If not *instant*, then sooner or later they almost always show up (Kabbo: Volume I). You just must be alert, ready and willing. Either way, this sparring exercise with a semi-pro was gonna be a terrific release, even for that stress, and a chance to demonstrate that aside from being a drunken hell-raiser (well known by then), I wasn't no cuddly puppy sober either. I could be mean and hard too. I'll break your fucken ribs if I can, puncture your lungs too, and I'll try, so *let's do it, cocksucker, let's roll!*

Under a blazing sun reflecting off the water's shimmering, waveless surface, one hot afternoon on the main deck, up by the bow, we formed a tight ring, maybe eight feet in diameter, with the dozen or so sailors surrounding us to watch the demonstration, where we began the slow, ritual circling each other before he closed in on me. Man, this dude could hit, throwing powerful punches to my chest, shoulders, and upper arms—practically bone-shattering—no face shots, of course, but *kaPOW kaPOW kaPOW!* Had they been head shots, they would have been knockout blows, the kind I had been striving for for years but as yet hadn't achieved. Of course, in these kinds of exercises, in my experience, the dominant partner gives the opponent the opportunity not just to demonstrate how stubbornly able he was to take shots and not puss out or break (see Kabbo: Volume I, *Slim*), but how powerfully he could deliver'm too. If not, it looks bad, too one-sided, so for every three or four shots I took, he'd lower his guard and reduce his reaction time just enough for me to land one, maybe two blows delivered with my own precision, power, and speed, y'know, just to make it look more like a match and not so much like the obvious overmatch it clearly was, so I had that satisfaction: he'd have to pay a bit for his pleasure, and there'd be no hard feeling as there was with that other beer-bloated chump. And my shipmates, well, they too, saw I wasn't no soft-shell. This went on for the two or three two- or three-minute rounds, which was a good thing for everyone to witness, as not many of them could or

would want to exchange body shots with LaCurta either, so the display earned me a bit of respect by just being there and hanging on, absorbing, and on occasion delivering. No one saw me basically puss-out by taking a pass with Alversa (never trust a light-haired Italian) then and there (though his head shot was nothing like LaCurta's powerful body wops, pardon the pun), so I didn't have that to live down, just my drunken foolery on shore leave with the boys, which was not exactly unheard of in these circles. I guess it goes with the territory—drunken sailors on shore leave—or at least it came with my territory.

Though we bonded a bit after the sparring theatrics, the friendship never really took off. Instead, that stocky dude who stopped me on the gangway before boarding, blocking me as I sprinted from the taxi headed towards muster, Seaman Hickey, we hit it off almost right away as brothers. He came from a large, Irish Catholic family of brothers and sisters, so he had a natural pull in that direction, especially on those he aimed at. As part of the getting-to-know-you ritual, this barrel-chested, blue-eyed "sandhog" from the Rockaways told me calmly that he never lost a fight, and, to illustrate his point, he stood in the doorway between two compartments and threw a reasonably fast front snap kick that reached the limit of its top range inches higher than his head, all the way to the top of the bulkhead. For a guy his size and build, it was an impressive display of focused power, agility, and speed, like a teenage buffalo that could tap-dance. He told me why he didn't go for the Seals. I don't remember the reason, but I could see him as one, or close to one, and said that he had a black or brown belt in one of the martial arts, not karate, probably Kung Fu or some sort of Rockaway-style Aikido, and from the looks of that kick, it was credible. It was the first and possibly only time that I ever heard anybody make that bold claim about their fight record. In my book, if you haven't ever lost, then you've never been fully tested, but it could happen, sure, but either way, I wouldn't want a real piece of him, or LaCurta, for that matter, neither of them, not without going for broke, that is. Of course, "never lost a fight" = *not fully tested* doesn't apply so much in the professional ring. Marciano never lost a *professional* fight, but arguably all his opponents were worthy pro fighters, at or close to his level, so he was tested by every one of them, from Rex Layne to Archie Moore, all highly qualified contenders. That must be said;

the Rock earned that. But I'm talking mainly *street fights*, no refs, no gloves, no rules. Anyway, despite the somewhat dubious claim and all it meant to me, he succeeded in persuading me that he was a *badass*, the real thing, and a necessary component of any close friendship I'd choose to make, as well as a potential future asset for Arkay Trucking. If I can't rely on you when there is trouble about and fists flying, well, then you're not much of a friend to me. That simple. And somehow, I must have impressed him too, probably to the same degree, because sometime along that journey we became real friends. It might have started on the gangway but was definitely sanctified and solidified by the alleged "race riot" that I started in the galley on the seventh or eighth day underway.

As reported earlier, the lines are long and slow, single file, and three times a day, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Though they kind of break up the work routine monotony, they're no fun to stand in and wait on, rolling and rocking with the waves, up the ladders and through the narrow hatches, and usually by the time you get up to the front, grab your grub, and find a seat, you often have to wolf it down because your billet's time allotment may be just about to expire and the next work detail is coming up fast. So, it's extra tension on top of standard tension—bored, frustrated, angry dudes doing time at sea, even with the relief of some pretty decent food and plenty of it. No doggy-bags though. You can't save it for later, no place to stow it anyhow, no private refrigerators, at least not for enlistees. Officers though? Whole 'nother galaxy. They had their own everything: cabins, galleys, cooks, you name it. They weren't chipping paint or slamming hot cases down with asbestos gloves in the bowels of the gun mounts, either. They were calling the shots, literally. That's what you get for that level of commitment and discipline, so it makes sense. If you want to be an officer, become one. Go for it. Just bring your best because you're going to need it, all of it. Though it looked attractive, those clean white suits and polished brass buckles, that option was pretty much out of the question for me, having already decided that back at Nimitz. I brought my best to Mr. Jimmy D and his little red truck and the babes, my stable of "hot numbers," which was enough for me at the time to feel like a living, breathing human being with an active agenda, so anything beyond that would have been unnecessary excess and likely doomed to failure. Here aboard the World

War II vintage destroyer, I was content just to get by and not have to *walk the plank*, and even with just that, my hands were full.

Coming up now and nearing the end of the two-week active duty drill meant almost getting through the mission without any untoward damage, even with all the crazy risks I'd taken, starting by just being there in the first place. Discharged, almost, Honorably yes, but not quite completely, no. As it turned out though? True to form. I couldn't quite make it through. A trouble-free two-week out-to-sea adventure was still a bridge too far for the likes of this Seaman Recruit. Here's what happened.

This particular day, while waiting on the nearly hour-long chow line, first on the deck, then in the galley, rolling with the sickening, relentless waves, the dam broke. By the time I got up to the servers, two young sailors were flipping burgers on the grill behind the metal countertop, separated from the crew by a quarter-inch-thick, transparent, plastic barrier suspended from above that keeps the heat from the overhead lamps in and the sailors out. No grabbing, coughing on, or otherwise handling any of the food not yet served. One black guy and the other white, were busy talking to each other instead of serving me, basically ignoring me. By this time, the monotony, frustration, and boredom, added to the stress of never being able to get more than four hours of continuous sleep, if that, while constantly interrupted by this or that work detail, had mounted to the saturation point, now the super-saturation point. At first, after giving them a quick moment or two's grace, I said something innocuous to get their attention, maybe even in a polite joking way, "Hey! You guys busy?" but to no avail. They kept on with their bullshit conversation as if I were of no account at all, provoking me by deliberately humiliating me in the presence of both the chow line sailors and the seated sailors. Okay, fine. They didn't know me yet. That's when the voice took over, and I snapped. Now, enraged and entirely out of patience or control, I reached beneath the plastic shield and, using my fork, helped myself to two burgers off the big trays and dropped them on my tray, a total breach of galley protocol. That was all I wanted though—food, but it's a major violation of the mess hall order and their rate's integrity. Only food handlers get to handle food behind that partition. Simple. Right? Okay, but now at least I have both their attention and everyone else's. The now

attentive but enraged black cook reaches under the plastic shield from his side and grabs my tray away from me. *Check*. At which point I reached in again, now with both free hands, grabbed the two large cooking trays, one in each hand, the ones with all the burgers sizzling on them, more than a dozen each and flung them both up forcefully right into their faces, shattering the overhead heating lamps and spraying about a million glass fragments all over the place. *Mate*. At that point, he runs at me from behind the counter and throws up his fists. I don't budge, but as soon as he's in range, I turn to him and reach up to grab both his forearms and wrists. We start tussling. It wasn't long before—maybe only three or four seconds—just long enough for the shipmates to process what was happening before the rest of the sailors jumped up, grabbed us both, and pulled us apart. At that point, aside from the food that was ruined and the long, tube-like heating bulbs that shattered all over the place, there was no further damage. No actual blows were thrown or delivered, just a sort of indecisive wrestling for power and position that ended in a sort of aborted draw. I had calmed down by then anyway, having already unmistakably made my point. But now I'm in trouble. Real trouble. Word spread that there was a "race riot" on board the USS MC Fox 829 while underway, and Seaman Recruit Kabakoff started it. Despite that nonsense, everyone there, including the food servers, knew it had nothing to do with race, ethnicity, skin color, or astrological sign. It was just three stressed-out egos headbutting out at sea on a floating prison, but because one of the dudes was African American, well, the rumor practically spread itself. Anyway, that's what Seaman Hickey and probably the captain too heard: "Kabakoff" and "race riot." I was a menace to the fleet.

Meanwhile, back at the beach

In *America's Healthiest City*, I continued living an avowed hedonist's lifestyle on a workingman's budget, using table wine as morning mouthwash and swallowing rather than spitting Port Gallo, a refreshing way to start the day. Life was to be enjoyed, not endured, so drink up. The rent still had to be paid, though, and I was counting on the payment from this active-duty cruise to cover it for a month or more. The shipmates informed me that a

forfeiture of pay was the most likely outcome at Captain's Mass, the one I was summoned to, the one I had to report to on the bridge in a day or two in dress blues, the suit, and the cap again. There were going to be consequences. The other guy got a pass. I think he was a full-timer, *but that reserve guy, me?* He had to be shown a thing or two about who rules the roost out at sea, and it wasn't him, no matter what the smart-ass twenty-year-old thinks is going on here. The Mass was scheduled for a few days later, so there was plenty of time to sweat about the possible outcomes. I mean, after all, by all rights, I wasn't even supposed to be in *this man's* navy in the first place, let alone consistently making the type of trouble I was so inclined to. But here, there was no choice. You can't say "no," refuse, plead the Fifth, get a lawyer, or otherwise cop out because the captain on board a ship, especially when *underway*, is virtually a god—not *like* a god, *is* a god. There is no higher authority save Neptune, and he's been MIA since the Argonaut days. According to the UCMJ, the captain has virtually unlimited power over you and can put you in the brig, put you on bread and water, or more likely, dock you your pay, and again, that's what worried me most. It was going to be a decent check and would likely cover closer to two months' rent than one, and losing it would hurt. Yeah, I know, I should have thought about that before throwing those trays up in their faces, but I didn't. The voice took over and called the shots, saying "Go!" and now the bill for that little act of self-expression was on its way. Anyway, that's what Hickey heard about and soon realized it was the same guy who tried to rush past him that morning with "sand in his ears," as he put it, so he decided that for him, I was definitely friendship material, wild and out of control with a lot of balls, audacity, andchutzpah in spades. Sadly though, according to most standards and reasonable minds, all that audacity and drive were for all the wrong things, but not by my compass at the time and apparently not by Jimmy's either. As we saw it, it was all just about right.

Captain's Mass, the final act of an unlikely drama

The name itself—just the name alone—of the procedure is foreboding: a Captain's Mass. While *battle stations* sound dangerous but lively, *standing watch* sounds peaceful and relaxing, *Captain's Mass* sounds solemn, final,

and deadly. Standing outside the door to the bridge where the Mass is held in my Cracker Jack outfit, try as I might, I couldn't come up with any kind of defense or even a reasonable excuse for my actions. What could I say? *They pissed me off? Sorry about the wasted food and shattered bulbs, but it's their fault, so they had it coming?* None of that was gonna help me. The whole thing, standing there, waiting for execution, reminded me of the "haircut" procedure back in the Topic House days (Kabbo: Volume I), but this was a lot more serious, making those other theatrical formalities feel like jokes by comparison. And then it began. Called in. Standing at attention, facing him from only a few feet away from where he sat in the captain's chair, I knew it was over after a brief pause, a quick glance, and only his opening line. The whole fantasy crashed against the hull of the ship, springing a leak, and is now sinking. With a look of mild puzzlement bordering on mockery, the quiet utterance from the captain was, "Where *did* you get that Mickey Mouse cap?" Up until that moment, outside the PX, no one noticed or said anything about the knock-off cap. To me and just about everyone else, it appeared close enough to the real thing to pass muster, as it consistently had—until now. As soon as he said that I was finished, the entire charade came to an end at that moment. It was like that single loose thread no one notices or bothers with until someone sharp, with both the time and interest begins to tug on it. Maybe just a little pull at first, but as it gives way, eventually the entire garment unravels. He noticed the cap and started to pull. I mean, they don't put you in charge of a multi-million-dollar warship unless you are a very sharp tack with a keen mind and an eagle eye, and this guy was obviously no exception. It's doubtful I even said a word; I doubt if I was even asked for one; there were no "*whys*" or "*hows*." He didn't care, and it didn't matter. This wasn't summer camp or TOPIC House, and a Captain's Mass is not a therapy session. I don't remember anything about it after that, the cap comment; I just kept my mouth shut until I heard him say "dismissed." The adventure was over, and with that, my luck had finally and completely run out.

If there hadn't yet been enough memorable excitement during this fantasy-come-almost-true expedition, then this last scene of the final act before the epilogue certainly put a fitting coda on my seafaring adventure. After so many days at sea, as we entered the narrows heading towards the New

York harbor and the Brooklyn port, there was another deckhand's routine function to be performed. As Neptune would have it, despite my well-earned reputation as a hellraiser and inept-at-the-helm troublemaker, the honor fell to me. It was a rainy springtime afternoon, and the water was choppy. Even on a big boat like ours, you could really feel it, the rising and falling and, at times, even the swaying of the ship, so you definitely needed your sea legs steady on deck, and by then I had them. It's a balancing act, which always played to my strengths, like in wrestling or calisthenics; I was always a lot better at them than at any sort of discipline, diplomacy, or self-control. The task is a simple one, release the anchor. All you need to know is how to swing a sledgehammer on cue and hit your target with it. Easy enough and really pretty cool. They sent me right up to the far end of the bow, again on the main deck, right near where we sparred back under the blazing Caribbean sun, with not only the headphones and speaker set but also a big, heavy, long-handled sledgehammer. Yes, they trusted me with a 10-pound iron and a wooden pounding tool. Good thing I didn't have one down below in the galley. Unbelievable, right? Just like the rest of this story, but nonetheless, it's all true, every word, at least exactly as remembered. Anyway, now the thing is, the boat is really pounding the waves, lifting and falling with the swell, and it's raining, pouring chilly April showers, a total wrap-around experience, calling in everything you have to play. The detail is that, at the command coming over the headphones to whack the single iron locking pin on the deck with the business end of the heavy hammer, the immense chain secured to the ship by a series of mechanical devices below deck is released and begins to unwind, and so drop the anchor. This is done a long time, like maybe a half-hour or more, before you actually need it to do its job and fully stop and secure the ship. That's because it takes that long for the thing to fully unravel and drag the ship to a complete halt. But anyway, there I was, in the wind and in the rain, a heavy downpour, hammer in hand, rising and falling with the bow of the ship, waiting for the command for like five, maybe ten minutes, maybe longer, taking it all in: the rain, the wind, and salt air; the vast space of sea and sky coming into sharp focus in contrast with the shore and skyline, a surreal vision like a dream, sailing past the Statue of Liberty, her torch raised in salute; yes, *I helped guard our shores!* It was yet another moment like docking in Old San Juan, except this time it was just me, solo again, out there on the deck of the MC

Fox. As soon as the command came over the radio, I raised the heavy pounding device above my head, still wearing that knockoff cap, and whacked that pin with all the aim and as much force as I could bring, then immediately felt and heard the heavy groaning of the chain starting to crank below deck and grind beneath my feet as it began to unwind. If I could imagine a better scene to close out my on-again, off-again, on-again, off-again naval career with, I would have a far better imagination than I do, so in this case, well, the truth alone will have to do because that's all I really got and that's all we really need.

When the final check came, paid in full, I was grateful and relieved, cut slack again, thanks Uncle Sam. They don't tell you what the judgment is going to be; they let you suffer for a while with the anxiety of not knowing until it happens, so the check was a surprise. But I was still done. It was over. I had my experience being a sailor out to sea, and it was great, all of it, exciting and fun, but the prediction I made back in Camp Nimitz, San Diego, that "I'm only going to get in trouble here" wasn't just talk; it actually came to pass, *to thine own self be true*, my own self being a born-to-lose trouble-maker. That's maybe what justified the Honorable; I was straight up, looked them in the eyes, and laid it out, ugly as it was. Again, the truth, but who knows? I wasn't just saying that to get out of having collected the entire allotment of permitted demerits for the eight weeks of basic training in just a little over three, and here was more trouble, worse trouble, and on top of all that, I was some kind of fraud for even just being there in the first place, a fraud that followed instructions, you might say, so whatever that is. I was trying my hand at going along to get along and took it as far as I could without a trip to the stockade.

Epilogue

On board, there was an officer whom I sort of made friends with named McGovern, First Lieutenant McGovern. He was a young, sharp-looking cat, probably an Annapolis guy, when we crossed paths on the ship or in port, and he glanced at me in passing, and for the instant I could see that he sort

of got where I was coming from. It amused him. He probably saw my jacket—the one with the name of the ship embossed on the back. It was pretty cool, and pretty much everyone dug it. No one else had one; they probably never even imagined one, so despite my behavior, I earned some kind of points for originality. Maybe I should have answered the captain: "*The same place I got the cool jacket, sir!*" But, wisely enough for once, I left the smart-ass outside the bridge at the door. When two people, especially two guys, get the same joke in the same way, well, aside from punching each other, it's another way to make friends, and that's probably what happened, so it's ironic that he became the guy I confessed to. The next drill, a month later, I showed up in Brooklyn with my DD-214 and that letter from the commander at Floyd Bennett Field, which taken together explains itself, so I didn't have to say much besides something like, "*It's been swell—lota' fun, and I really appreciate the opportunity, but I won't be coming back. We're done.*" He took the letter, looked at the discharge papers, and then looked at me, and in his eyes, I could see that vague inside joke we shared. Now we both knew exactly what it was. He sensed something wasn't quite as it appeared with me, again, like the cap, but unlike the captain, he didn't identify it, but now it was clear. So that was that. It was fun, and I was grateful, but the trouble was not over. Far from it, but I kept it out of the navy, where it didn't belong, for then. I kept it to *America's Healthiest City*, where, at least in some weird way, both me and my troubles did belong.

Chapter IV: *Expiration dates*

The snow started coming down early in the afternoon. By the time we went out that night, when me and Hannibal Hayes headed to the bar, the ground was already covered. It was really cold down there by the ocean, and beneath the thin top layer of fresh snow was a thinner sheet of ice covering the frigid, hard concrete, so it was a slippery mess. Not many other partygoers were out that night in the local gin mill where we headed on the quiet, wintry weeknight: the *Arizona*, named for the West End street it was on by the beach, where all the streets were named for states. Definitely a local hangout and a workingman's drinking establishment well known for the regular brawls that livened up many an otherwise dull night, especially during the off-season. There were no live bands or dance floors, or if there even was one, no one knew about it or ever used it. There was, of course, a pool table, a jukebox, and a dartboard, and a lot of mean, frustrated, and angry semi-employed guys with nowhere near enough females around to keep all but a select few entertained, except maybe, like, one hot barmaid who was probably the owner's main squeeze, only adding to the frustration. The feeling came to me right away, practically as soon as we got there, sat at the bar, and ordered the first round. Having almost a sixth sense for it, I knew *there was going to be trouble here tonight*, but instead of turning around and finding somewhere else to play pool and get wasted in public, we decided to stay anyway, *fuck it*, and sure enough, yup, I was right, there sure was.

My studio was only a few blocks away, about ten minutes' walk, so I figured that even though I hadn't been raised or gone to school there, it was still my neighborhood, adopted, and I could drink wherever I could pay the bill. It was that kind of stubbornness that held me there, but Hannibal, who was living a few towns away, never moved to Long Beach even when he left his parents' comfortable home, so in that sense, he was my guest. I took him there for a night of partying, boozing, and possibly broads, not to be whaled on by a slew of drunken micks and rough-neck guinea pricks. It started, like

I said, pretty much right away. Not long after we got there, as I was crossing the bar, headed to the pool table or jukebox, another young guy, a local about my size, came from the opposite direction, and we had a mild, unintentional collision, kind of butting shoulders, as we passed through a narrow path between the mix of boozing customers and the pool table. We both turned around and locked eyes, but neither of us said anything; there was no gesture at all. After a brief eyeball-to-eyeball stare, we just turned back around and kept walking, no one bothering to say “*excuse me*,” smile, or nod, the usual conciliatory gesture; no, there was none. We just let it happen and left it there. That’s it, but now with faces marked. But that’s all it was: a moment of mutual, semi-voluntary rudeness. Nothing much happened after that between us; I didn’t even see or notice him again. Everybody just kept right on drinking and chatting it up, hoping for some ladies to arrive, darts, whatever, for the next couple of hours, and I was content to let it drop and didn’t even think about it again. I mean no big deal; no one had a drink spilled on them; not even any words were exchanged. After all, it’s not an etiquette society or a prison yard, so, as far as manners go, who cares? That was how it seemed to me until just after Hannibal and I had our last shots. Now, feeling no pain, we paid the bill and left. That’s when I felt a presence just behind me on the four or five icy and snow-covered steps that lead down from the saloon’s front door to the silent sidewalk just below. By this time, I was pretty boozed up but still sharp enough to do a half turn and spot the guy only a half step right behind me. Yeah, it was Mr. Shoulder Bump following us out, so I figured there had to be a reason—a bad one. He wasn’t coming out there to apologize, and I wasn’t guessing, asking, or waiting to find out whatever else it might happen to be. So, again, without so much as a word spoken, I landed a solid, over-the-shoulder, tight right hook just off the center of his drunken Irish mug. **Bam!** And he drops right where he stood, collapsed like a suddenly unstrung puppet down into the frozen snow. Out. It was so sudden, so fast, and quiet—practically silent—that Hannibal, just steps ahead of me, didn’t hear it, didn’t even know it happened, and I never said anything to him either; I just kept walking as if nothing had happened, nothing at all. Life was perfect. My first knockout. Now I was Rocky Balboa. That’s when *the voice* did us in, this time with its absence.

Three or four minutes later, we’re now about a block and a half away, a car pulls up, and four or five of his boys jump out. He musta’ got back up and went inside for his pals, probably telling them we jumped him, so they’re all over us, pounding away, two or three on each of us, and with the element of surprise. Poor Hannibal had no idea. After a minute or two of action, three of them got back into the car and sped away, leaving just two of them to face us, and then we started laying into them, who, surprised that we still had fight left in us, began retreating. They must have thought it was gonna be a simple mop-up operation. Hannibal taunts, “*What’s a matter? Two on two too much for you?*” as he swung and connected, me on the other, all adrenaline now, no pain, no fear, so now they’re taking the shots. Usually, most of the time, once you take a few punches, if you’re still standing, the fear part vanishes—no more *flight*, just *fight*—so it was payback for payback time. The next thing you know, a minute or two or maybe three after that, a couple of the ol’ reliable LBP radio-cars pull up, the uniforms jump out, jump in and break up the action. No arrests, no charges, no kicks to the face, no nothing. In fact, they even drove my stunned and beat-up guest and me back to my place. But the damage was done. Not only to our busted up faces, but also our friendship taking a hard hit. After clocking the guy, I should have grabbed my buddy and had the both of us get lost fast. That would have been pretty easy to do, getting away; plenty of alleys readily available down in the state streets to cut through in the dark, but I didn’t even think of it. It never occurred to me. No voice. Silence. Instead of warning, like “*time to scram, Sam*,” I just kept strolling, enjoying the release of taking off on the guy and nailing my target so effectively like that, finally getting that knockout, and a good target too. This was no innocent stranger; he asked for it. Life was perfect, everything going my way while still walking through the momentarily peaceful white snow, but because of that terrible choice and its awful consequences, the bonds of a long and solid friendship were strained for the first time, and after all we’d been through together, blood brothers to the end, they were now beginning to seriously fray.

Another good-time Charlie

In the bitter cold of a Long Beach winter, everyone and everything, creatures large and small, cute and homely, young and old, crazy and sane

and in between, needs a warm place to stay, some food, and a few hugs. He was a neighborhood, gray, and white alley cat that, from time to time, surfaced around the front patio of my apartment. Good looking creature too, but with two different colored eyes, distinctive and odd, and in a lopsided kind of way, endearing. It was mid-November, so the air was growing kinda' frosty in the breeze out there by the ocean, especially after dark, and since I was mostly solo, well-fed, and warm inside, I began leaving him dishes of milk, water, or even canned tuna just outside my door, which naturally led him to come around more frequently. When he came by and I saw him, I'd open the door and try to signal to him that it was okay to come inside, where he'd be not only fed but warm too, but no dice. If I made a move toward him? He fled. Not unexpected. It took a couple of weeks, you gotta' be patient with most cats, especially strays used to fending for themselves, like with some ladies too, used to being alone. If you move too quickly or abruptly, they get spooked and run away. So, after you show'm some interest, you then have to show'm you're not gonna chase them either; that they are free to come and go as they please. No hooks. Then, sometimes, if they start to calm down and let you get close, they might actually come to you. That's what happened with *Cat*, what I called him, her, or it (I never bothered to check). One chilly day, after a few weeks of free meals, Cat summoned up the curiosity and courage to enter my welcoming, warm domain, and that was it. Now, I have a new friend and roommate with two different colored eyes. Except maybe once or twice at the start, he never even ventured back out into the cold again. All he needed was one of those kitty litter boxes discreetly placed by the back room door and the scraps of my food, which I shared with him. Basically, aside from the milk, he ate what I ate, same menu, so Cat was no trouble at all. None. Eventually, he became so comfortable and content and in love with me, *Human*, he slept on my chest, purring so loudly that it almost kept me awake, but I didn't mind, not at all. In fact, he was great company—another living thing—all winter long. And my lady guests? The other occasional humans? He didn't bother them at all either; if anything, they shared in the affection. Chicks dig cats more than dudes do. We like dogs, but they are a lot of work and very needy. Nothing like the feline species that occasionally and conditionally permit you to need them, as I soon came to learn.

By early springtime, I figured he probably wanted to go out now. There's gotta' be a few lonely local lady cats out there that he wants to visit, so let me open the door and signal that he's free to just come and go. I wasn't kicking him out, though, no, not by any means, just letting him be free if he wanted to be. No hooks, no strings—just an open door. So, guess what happened. He goes out and not only never comes back, but when I saw him again around the neighborhood, he wouldn't even let me get anywhere near him. As soon as I bent down and called to him to try to get him to approach me, again not chasing or in any way moving quickly, he'd go scaredy-cat on me and run away like I was a total stranger or dangerous. Crazy. No gratitude. No new home and no new friends—back to his solitary life of constant prowling, hunting birds and mice, and feeding off garbage scraps. Nothing. Back to the homeless alley cat he was before bunking in with me for the winter. Moral of the story? *Everything has an expiration date.* A lesson you have to learn again and again in this short and uncertain span of time we call life, sometimes with great relief and other times with degrees of sadness, but in either case, expected or sudden, it's always true. Friendships, pets, and jail sentences included. Everything.

Big Al the virgin

That was his nickname, courtesy of *Kabbo*. He was a tall, thin, soft guy with really long hair down past his shoulders and a full scraggly beard from upstate New York, whose father was the local Methodist minister. Big Al, the minister dad, the Betty Crocker mom who baked and knitted, maybe taught a bible class, and at least one pretty hippie sister all lived in the large, older, church-owned three-story farmhouse on a tree-lined street in a very comfortable part of town populated by similar homes, surrounded by tall oaks and elms, detached two-car garages with lofts at the ends of long drive-ways, the works. On the whole, the guy was uncharacteristic of most of the kinds of friends I'd typically make. He probably never had a fistfight in his life, so in that case he was useless or worse, I'd have to look out for him, but we had a few other important things in common, which substantiated the bond. First and foremost, he loved weed. We'd go on weed hunts

together. He had a goofy little red two-door car, a four-speed Cricket, which fit this gentle guy's style, except that he was a bit too tall for it but still managed, and that meant we could get around from town to town in search of our quarry, paying visits to the known pot-sellers or trying to meet new ones, and we'd just about always score, determined and mobile as we were, so that was the one thing. The other thing, not quite as urgent but nonetheless important enough, was a shared passion for music. We both loved it, couldn't be without it, had to have it, like weed, and pretty much the same type, deeper cuts heavy on instrumentals: *Jeff Beck*, *The Mothers of Invention*, *Crazy Horse*, *The Allman Brothers*, and the *Dead*, lighter on lyrics; music seldom heard on commercial radio at the time, except for maybe college radio or the one or two commercial-free stations found on the lower end of the FM dial like WPLJ, and he was a craftsman. Big Al made top-notch, beautiful bass guitars by hand and from scratch. He knew every element, from the types of steel strings to the ebony frets to the pickups with inlaid mother-of-pearl plates to the oaken or walnut bodies themselves, and he made them for musicians' custom orders. Although I didn't know much about them or fully appreciate their nuances, even to my uninformed eyes and hands, they were impressive. None of them gaudy or gimmicky in any way, no mirrors or shiny plastic emblems or decals, nothing like that; more like the standard and classic style, simplicity, form to function, that kind of look, but with the finest material and best workmanship. So, all things considered, though not a hitter, he was still cool enough to call *friend* and hang with, and, it seemed, he could be trusted. Otherwise, he knew I'd fuck him up, one, two, three.

The moniker came from his height, the "big" part (probably about 6'1" or 2"), and only about 140-50 lbs., slim, like a bass guitar neck, and the "virgin" part because he was so soft, kinda' pale, and delicate, y'know, a long-haired preacher's son from up the country and a musician. Taken all together, it was doubtful he'd ever gotten laid. Musicians, besides hitters and delinquents, were my other set of friends, and there was some overlap. Of course, musicians like to get high too while they jam, and actually, that is a lot better than getting drunk and having your face bashed in, or even cracking someone else's face, but playing music, especially playing well, takes talent, discipline, and skill, while the other shit just takes being crazy,

drunk, malicious, and not very stymied by risk. But getting high and listening to music? Groovin' peacefully to the fine, flowing tunes, your soul soaring with song? Well, I had the lust for that too, so why not? And these guys, my musician friends, well, they were really, really good, like Danny Nathan at sixteen on the keyboard. That cat could play like Stevie Winwood if you heard him on the ivories playing Traffic's *Glad*. It was astounding. I took lessons as a kid, maybe four or five years, so I appreciated what kind of discipline and talent that took, and it definitely wasn't in me, not in most folks. Ted Lewand on guitar? He could play like Jeff Beck, I mean, really. If you heard these guys from another room, you might think it was them—the actual dudes—live, right in there. They were that good, seriously, at least to my ears. So, me and *Big Al the Virgin* did some righteous hangin' out, spent many a peaceful and pleasurable hour toking up in someone's parents' house, and grooving to the creative vibes these young guys put together and laid out in sound. Also, I made sure never to be involved in any kinda' brawl with him around. It wasn't at all his scene. He'd've been eaten alive, so I looked out for him in that way. That being the case, it was a real surprise when, one afternoon at my beach pad, from out of nowhere, he challenged me. Crazy, stupid fuck.

Though nowhere near as highly skilled and developed as the work needed for making custom bass guitars, the other devices near and dear to my heart were lovingly constructed with my own limited but focused talents. Nunchaku was my friend; there was something physical and arguably athletic that I liked and was pretty good at. Me and Hannibal used to build them out of broomstick handles and nylon cord, and we could really swing them fast, hard, and accurately, Bruce Lee style. We'd watch his movies and try to replicate the moves, at least as best as we could. Not everyone can be a master technician and a true martial artist like Lee was. And I never even cracked anyone with them, as it was never necessary or available when it mighta' been, but we practiced all the time just in case, occasionally even carrying them for the day when preparedness might meet opportunity and some bad guy's bones would shatter and all those smashed finger tips and unintended raps to the back of the head and elbows would payoff by making some type of practical sense.

It was the first time the virgin drove his little red Cricket out of the Rock to visit me at the beach, when me, him, and Horse were planning lunch at my pad and an afternoon of music, food, beer, and weed. It was great to see him. It had been many months since the last time we hung out, maybe even before TOPIC House. Today, a friend from the old neighborhood and I will be renewing our friendship by taking it to the next level with an out-of-town visit. Right away we got to talking, catching up, smoking, goofing around, playing Clapton and Costello, *The Core*, and *Red Shoes* on my trusty eight-track, when, for some crazy reason, maybe I had the nunchaku out, maybe demonstrating my current level of prowess by swinging them, knocking cans off walls, wearing thick leather ski gloves to protect my hands, constantly improving my timing, force, focus, and finesse, when he absurdly, especially for him, said he could take me on by using a knife against my sticks. That's crazy right there, unless you can pull a James Coburn *Magnificent Seven* move and throw it at me from twenty feet away and land it four inches into my chest. But for sure, that's not what he could have been thinking. He couldn't throw a wiffle ball at a movie theater screen and make it pop. No idea what got into the virgin, but he kept repeating it, and though I tried to laugh it off the first few times, like it was a joke, by repeating it, insisting on it, over and over, deadpan straight, not a trace of irony or humor, he was beginning to wear on me and, eventually, started to really piss me off. He seemed serious, even crazy, until I finally said, "Okay, let's see." Now, we both get up from the small kitchen table we'd been seated around toward the rear of the studio and move to a more central space in the center of the one-room apartment. He's holding a large steak knife (part of my kitchen gear) at about chest height, brandishing it towards me as though that's from where he was going to leap forward and plunge it into me. Standing only about one or two feet apart, facing him real close, holding the nunchaku in the basic, loaded, and ready to strike position, a stick in each hand, over and under my right shoulder, I took a half step back and then snapped it, whacking the knife's blade in a single shot so hard and perfectly aimed that it broke from the handle and went flying off into the room somewhere, leaving him holding only the wooden handle without the blade. It was a perfect shot, better than I intended, and thought it had clearly made the point. Case closed, *right?* But no, he wasn't done yet. We both sat back down. I'm still thinking, "Point made; time to move on" when

he comes out with a dismissive, derisive "*that was luck*" crack. That was *luck*? Like a four-leaf clover? Like a rabbit's foot? A royal straight flush? Not hours and hours over years and years of practice, not to mention plenty of smashed finger bones and bruised elbows in the process. Luck? Really? What am I going to have to do? Break your arm? I'll show you "luck," you long-haired, stupid-ass spastic fuck. And again he sneers and repeats "luck," now a four-letter word, and now I'm ballistic. Insult to injury always makes me berserk, so I lost it and cracked him hard with my open right hand across his face, a stinging blow and a shaming slap in front of Horse, a mutual friend and witness. That made two shaming blows, first with my friend the trusty nunchaku and then with my hand—enough now to leave their marks and deliver their messages. No further comment from Big Al the Virgin; he looked hurt and surprised, then exited Big Al the Virgin, hurt, yes, but largely self-inflicted. Crazy. The expiration date cometh; thus, a friendship goeth. What the fuck? Shit. Not at all what I had in mind by inviting him over. I was sorry right away, but it was too late. You can't always undo what's already been done; that's a life lesson learned early. Whatever, that's how it sometimes goes when the last of the luck runs out.

What goes around comes around

Harvey Lowenstein was a local politician, a man about town, probably a city commissioner or alderman or something else like that. I'd catch a glimpse of him from time to time, either on a local campaign poster or in person, maybe glad-handing on the boardwalk or holding informal court outside the city hall, the same building as the police precinct, except the entrance with the wide steps and tall glass doors was naturally in the front, facing downtown, where the cops and criminals used the side, lower-profile entrance. He was huge, professional football player size, and although he was often seen, as most politicians are, smiling, shaking hands, laughing it up, kissing babies, etc., he also looked like you didn't want to be on his wrong side. He could be a frightening adversary. The smile seemed to me more like a politician's mask. Of course, never having had any direct dealings with him, or even any second-hand knowledge of any direct dealings with him, I didn't know any of this; just my keenly astute, half-

drunk, half-drugged, half-crazed impression was what I went by, but not totally out of nowhere. People who seek power? Well, what do you expect? Something I did know was that he had at least two children, both about my age: his son, who was the local high school football star, probably the quarterback, and the second, a daughter, who just so happened to be one of my boardwalk conquests. She was kinda' on the large side too, but hell, at twenty years old, big, small, and in between, "black ones, round ones, big ones, crazy ones.." were all welcome and fair game. I never even knew she was his daughter until after the fact, and I think it was a one-and-done'r so it really didn't matter. The list was ever-growing, but it was still an interesting detail to note, especially in light of additional details to come. The handsome, athletic, alpha male son, though? That was an encounter in a whole 'nother realm. I'll bet you can guess.

There was another bar in town I'd frequent, Nolan's, also on the main drag, Park Avenue, but in a residential area. The Arizona and I were through; no reason to return to the scene of that particular crime, no desire either, but this other place, Nolan's, had a whole different atmosphere, not so much esthetically but temperamentally. First, it was on the east side of town; another old man, local, watering-hole, less blue-collar, less rowdy, lower key, more residential, smaller but still complete with the vital pool table and dart board prerequisites. There might even have been a college graduate or two among the regulars. Who knew? Either way, it was not totally without risk for me. The big bison was known to drink there, and despite the fact he said he'd let it go—me slapping his sister like that—there was always the chance he might be there and, in his own drunken malaise, take it back, change his mind or forget he said it. But there was no clear sign of that, thankfully; it was just something to keep alert for. So it was a reasonably green light, carousing there, at least by my standard of what constituted reasonable. And it was close to Amalfi where I had backup if needed. The regular bartender there was a young, low-key, light-haired guy with a full beard who smoked a pipe and wore turtleneck sweaters, looking like a Swedish fishing boat captain or first mate, and I'd see him around town from time to time during the daylight hours, running a crew of moving men and commanding the big truck of one of the local companies' so I marked him as a potential employer, still intent on working my way into that industry. In

fact, Jimmy D began giving me small jobs of his to do on my own, even loaning me his big Suburban to do them, only having to pay for the gas it used, so I was feeling pretty confident and ready.

Yeah, he gave me my wings. On one of my first solo jobs, I used it to full-on move a two-bedroom apartment from one part of town to another, Long Beach to Long Beach, which meant that since it was really no more than a beefed-up station wagon, there would need to be many short trips back and forth instead of just one long and complete one. But otherwise, by putting your back into it and knowing the ropes, it could be done just as well. So, me and my two-man crew went at it carefully, steadily, and with serious, undiminished intent. Getting the job done, and done right meant getting the next one. That's the principle I operated on throughout my term as a trucking magnate, big or small jobs, each one the key to the ne./xt. Anyhow, when the lady of the house's mother-in-law saw me pull up that morning in the Suburban, she had a shitfit right on the street and right in my face. "*What the hell is that?*" she demanded, but right away threw it right back at her ten times as forcefully, basically telling her to *shut the fuck up, the job would be done just as I said it would, the price was the price, and the extra-hard work was on me, not anyone else, so back the fuck-off, lady*. Stunned by the immediacy and ferocity of my response, she had no choice at that point; moving day was here, but to get out of the way and let us start, so me and my hired hands went at it full force and got it done, taking at least ten hours of focused labor but completing it right and on time, exactly as agreed, costing her nothing additional but costing me three days of an aching body from all that extra lifting, carrying, and bending, but again, and most importantly, the job got done, money earned, on time, on budget, and without damage. I needed to build a reputation, and that's what it took: one job done right after the next. I wasn't a prep-school boy offering etiquette classes here either; I was just paying my dues to get started. That's all it was.

Back at Nolan's, one night I sorta' came out of a blackout after spending a few hours drinking; musta' been playing pool too, because when I came to, I was struggling with someone in the street just outside the front door over possession of a cue stick or a cue ball. Not sure, though it was definitely a

pool component. The outcome remains unclear, but I think it was a victory for me. Yes, that's right; it was the prized cue ball that I decided must be had. I found it in my apartment the next morning, so yeah, a minor victory. Maybe I thought it was some kinda' trophy. But I quickly called the bar, apologized, and returned it. All was forgiven. I wasn't the first or last shitfaced drunk to beclown himself by something foolish, stupid and inane there. It was a common occurrence. Guys like us kept the place afloat, spending more in one night than others spent in a week, maybe a month, and again, I had a reputation to maintain. The guy who took, then, *on his own*, a true mensch, returned the stolen cue ball. Yup, that was me, Honest Abe-like, the thoughtful, conscience-stricken cue ball bandit of *America's Healthiest City*.

Another time, beginning at Nolan's, this one may not be so good, maybe not so bad either, but definitely very Eli Wallach-worthy ugly. Late one Saturday night, well after midnight, just after leaving the bar, alone as usual, while still holding and drinking from the last mug of beer they served me, intending to return that too, like it was a library or something, for some lazy, drunken reason I jumped into a taxi, taking the four- or five-block ride to Long Beach Road at the main intersection with Park Avenue, where there was a 24-hour fast food joint I was especially partial to, especially late at night, drunk and hungry, a compact taco place called *Jack In The Box*. Anyway, stumbling out of the taxi, still holding the heavy, thick glass mug, by now more than half empty and semi-staggered with it, still nursing what was left of the suds, into the place to chow down some of their hot, fresh, *deeeelicious* tacos when I notice Harvey's son on line, the football star with a few of his entourage in tow. The handsome, well-built dude, who kinda' looked like Tom Cruise only not so pretty, looked over at the staggering little drunk and musta' said something to me, something insulting, or maybe just gave me a condescending look, mocking me for walking around in a virtual stupor carrying and drinking from a beer mug like the world was all mine. It's not clear exactly what he said or exactly how he triggered me, and though I recognized him as the local celebrity son of another local celebrity, he most likely had no idea who the hell I was before that innocent stroll into Jack In The Box. I wasn't looking for trouble, but, well? What can I say? All I do know is that, practically as soon as eye contact was made, we began to

exchange words. The next thing you know, from standing in the brightly lit far corner away from the line, I hurled the mug at him, full force, not to hit him (I'm guessing), but rather to make a point; the unabashed voice: "*I'm a wild card, dude; mess with me, and I'm gonna to ruin your night. I don't care who you are or who you think you are or how I might have to pay for the privilege, it's gonna happen,*" the thick mug shattering on the tiled wall behind him as punctuation. That prompted him to make his own point by rushing me and commencing to clobber me all over the place right away, fists to the face, head, and body, *bang! Bang! Bang!* Again and again, me barely feeling it but unable to react, not even block, another one of those *too drunk to fight just when I started one* routine, so I was overwhelmed right from the scrimmage line, no match for him physically even on my best day, but that didn't stop me from inciting the late-night, two-man riot in there, which, by the way, was all glass walls, front and sides, so anyone in the vicinity of the busiest intersection in town, even at 2 or 3 a.m. had a ring-side seat for me getting whomped. Within a minute or two, my ol' pals from the LBPd, who happened to be parked at the gas station just across the street were in there breaking it up, hauling him off me, two uniforms grabbing him by the shoulders and upper arms, securing him, holding him fast, forcing him face down forward towards me. As soon as he stopped whaling on me, and I cleared up for a second, just long enough to regain balance and a bit of vision, I took aim and kicked him as hard as I could square in the mug, *kaBAM!* Field goal style, almost exactly as they did to me a short time before, just as cowardly and just as hard, but without a badge or a gun or a precinct as backup, only backed up my big mouth and bad attitude, which is to say, backed up by nothing and no one.

Later, somehow, word came to me that he had lost a front tooth, courtesy of my well-focused field goal. Add another enemy to the growing threat list, now a thrice-marked man, and this time not by local dirt-bag thugs but by prominent people that would have my ass easily if they so chose. Again, an act dedicated to the steady development of my carefully cultivated and hard-earned reputation in my new hometown as a troubled soul best avoided, or placated, if possible. The cops, though? Unbelievable to report, but again, they just drove me home. Yeah, even after I kicked him as they held him back from pummeling me even further. No charges, no arrests, no

drunk and disorderly or assault, nothing—just a free lift home. Cops, like me, like most of us, and probably like the Lowenstein's too, the good, the bad, and the ugly in each of us rise and fall in turn as circumstances warrant.

True colors at expiration

High school ended a few years back, and by now, as we all know, many of the close friendships formed then or before begin to fade, then finally drift permanently apart. Some call it *moving on*; others call it *growing up*; or, like that great film, call it *Breaking Away*. I call it the *expiration date*. Everything has one, even and especially life itself—probably even the universe. My last two best buddies from those days, the ones that hadn't moved on, grown up, or just broken away, were *Scarborough* and *Horsehead* (Kabbo: Volume I). Although *Horse* tried breaking away, taking a semester or two upstate at a SUNY school, he soon realized he had nowhere near the self-discipline or even motivation to handle classroom work, so he was back on the barstool at the New Village Inn before the end of the second semester, wearing a tweed sport jacket and eyeglasses to dress up his short-lived charade as an academic. It was laughable, but in good fun. I mean, he couldn't even handle the pharmacy delivery job without blowing a gasket and then leaving the scene, a drug-addicted thief. A couple of years my senior, they hadn't left town, didn't go (or stay) away to college, didn't join the service, and still, together, we were all pretty much stuck in the same few towns and the same few watering holes we had been to since way back in my early high school drop-out days. In my case, though, yeah, by twenty I had already been away for a year at TOPIC House and a short time later for another few months on my cross-country and upstate excursions, so when I got back, well, things weren't quite the same. I had a much broader view now, but still felt close to these two guys, partying with them almost every night of the week. In my eyes, we were still tight; we had been through a lot of both good times and teenage turmoil together and still felt the loyalty and trust that bind friendships together, so when it turned out to be a mirage or past its expiration date, it was pretty damn disappointing and a painful letdown. To call it a *crushing blow* would be an overstatement, but it was definitely a

blow to the solar plexus. Hannibal Hayes, who was the last of the original 1974 *droogs*, took off west on his motorcycle to fish the Pacific seas off Seattle. The other original *droogs*? Fondue joined the Air Force and was last heard from while married and stationed in Alaska, and then no more. Jimmy Kane? My other partner-in-crime and buddy? He basically vanished long before. So, it was pretty much down to these two last close friends, allies and confidantes.

The New Village Inn, a freestanding, totally nondescript, one-story brick and stucco structure about three blocks south of the main downtown RVC commercial zone, was still the hub of their social world, and when I wasn't in Long Beach or the city raising hell, I was there with them, doing the same, pretending to fit in—as absurd an endeavor as ever there was. The place was categorically pathetic in every possible regard, attracting the town's stubbornly mediocre, committed underachievers, the guys who never went anywhere and had no ambition to ever go anywhere. They were content to just sit around in this totally uninspiring gin mill and drink beer, get a little drunk, and chew the fat with each other, y'know, local gossip, who got arrested, who got punched out, who got laid, who got dumped, fired, hired or drunk, mocking each other, maybe an occasional fistfight to liven things up, but not even a pool table, pinball machine or a dartboard. Only one of those lame-assed foosball tables and that other low-brow bowling-like game where you slide a stainless-steel puck along a polished wood surface peppered with sawdust at plastic mechanical pins, strikes, and spares, *morning regularity*. I mean, really dull nothing wrapped up in more dull nothing. Oh, and yeah, it did have the vital three-for-a-quarter jukebox, a big deal to entertain the collection of nobodies wrapped in nothing paper: no athletes, scholars, criminals, tough guys, professionals, musicians, entrepreneurs, money-makers, world travelers, artists, politicians, cops, creatives, or any other interesting character types with any noticeable talent or style at all. They were your everyday, run-of-the-mill, nine-to-five schmoes: store clerks, municipal workers, valets, low-level tradesmen, golf caddies, car-service drivers, gardeners, maybe an aspiring bartender, guys living at home with mom, dudes like that, who expected nothing more from life than a familiar bar stool and maybe a shot of pussy once in a while, getting married when the time came because it was the

thing to do, but otherwise not an ounce of ambition in the lot of them. Speaking of which, poontang, I don't think any women ever hung out there at all, or if any ever did, they were equally nondescript and essentially forgettable, which is some mean trick to perform among a crowd of supposedly horny bachelors. Who knows? But that's where they hung out because that's where their other friends were: the guys that lived close to their neighborhood in the south Rock who were mostly from similar backgrounds: Irish Catholics, English-Irish mutts, Italians, maybe a few Germans or mixed Scandinavians, and Polacks, but next to no Jews, aside from me and maybe, on rare occasions, one or two others, usually musicians or pot-sellers, dropping by to check-in; or Karl Abbey, also from the south, who beat up an adult bus driver at thirteen years old and could kick any three guys' asses in there at the same time, and everyone knew it, but no one resented him, as he never played the bully. But certainly no blacks, Asians, or Latinos. In other words, they were a pretty conventional, middle-class, suburban, and boring group. Yeah, back in my kicked-out-of-high school days, I drank there. Sure, I'd drink anywhere that would serve me then, and the New Village Inn was never terribly strict or selective. Just the thrill of drinking underage at a bar meant a lot more than any bar itself actually did, but now at twenty, that was no longer an issue, so the only reason to ever be there at all was because my two lost, I mean, last pals still went there. As I said, the whole crew, stuck in nowhere, headed for more of the same, or less, a bar full of nothing.

None of that is to say that I couldn't hang out there if my other two pals were around. I could. Without them, though? Not very often, but I wasn't always so highfalutin' or overly impressed with myself. Sometimes the comfort of the known trumped my need for higher stakes risk, exploration and experimentation. I had the city for that. At least there I knew where things stood. If you put your clown hat on, that is, join them in living only for the cheapest thrills available via immediate gratification: "doing shots," cracking adolescent inside jokes at one another's expense or foosball, maybe some discreet weed in the back parking lot, stuff like that, a few of them might be okay after a couple beers: the mustachioed Bob Scotto who I dubbed "one-punch Nelson" because that was all he admittedly could take; Bob Burns, the one college guy who was definitely the most arrogant jerk in

that crowd ("*In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.*"), playing up his alleged intellect, three-syllable word sophistication (he and I would eventually butt heads.); and a harmless, prematurely balding doofus that liked to wear those plastic visor bean-counter peaks with rolled up gartered sleeves like a 1920s race-track clerk or bookie, and loved to deal poker for beer money they called "Rodent," or "the rodent" because, well, he somehow looked like a rodent, and the skinny, frizzy headed, boring but affable Al Gizmundi, who had a tall, very sweet, hot, blond sister (She wouldn't be caught dead there, just came in to drag him out every once in a while.); Jim Murray, a decent chap (with a bit more brains and humor than the others) who they called "Merc" but I never could make that connection; and even Big Richie, my henchman from Oceanside, would also occasionally make a round there, though he was definitely another outsider. Richie, who they called *Lurch* (but never to his face), was clearly not in that clique, nor were they in his. His friends had to be dangerous, or at least convincingly come off that way, though many, in fact, were actually convicted criminals, felons, villain types, local legends whose names he would suddenly burst out with in unexplained, uncontained joyful exuberance, shouting out to the sky: "*Leroy Harrington! Joe Fee! Roger Ofner! Rob Kabakoff!*" as if we were MVPs at the All Stars taking the field or rockstars taking the stage on the Ed Sullivan Show. On those rare occasions, Richie would suddenly show up, take the stool next to mine, get my attention by reaching into his pocket and quickly pulling out and flashing a fat wad of cash from a score he had just pulled, look me in the eye and excitedly exclaim "*Wildness!*" before leaving the bar together and proceeding to spend it all down as fast as he could on drugs, alcohol and hookers. In other words, the finer things that made life worth living, and without hesitation share every dime with whoever he was partying with until the last one was gone, which meant time for another score, which, like the true friend he was, he never invited me on, just to share the spoils.

The regular guys there, though, were, generally speaking and with all the generosity I can summon, decent and funny, in a sort of classically self-effacing kind of sophomoric way, no sadists or brutes. I never had any beef with any of them until something changed on their end—a sort of ugly coming of age, I guess you might say—and then we did.

The preceding derision isn't to suggest I hadn't staked a claim there of my own, so in a limited sense, though I took no pride in it, it was my bar too, a byproduct of all the time spent there, the place where I settled the score with Robert Fuck Face Hartley, the *crimee* turned rat who gave me up to the cops for our blundering burglary score, where we got nothing but costume jewelry, vials of useless prescription drugs, an opened bottle of booze and felony convictions for our efforts, (Kabbo: Volume I). Another example would be the time me and another Hebrew pal, David Mantor, a guy I dubbed "victim" so nothing like Kaluga. It's unclear why I was even friends with the swarthy, mustachioed young dude at all except for the fact that he had a running car and liked weed too. Despite his shit taste in music, like that faggot Peter Frampton, aside from his anthemic *Feel Like I Do* and Dave Mason, his car could facilitate the all-important, overriding hunting expedition urgency when we needed to score and our regular sources ran dry. So everything was groovy enough until that time when we got jumped—well, it was actually him, not me, until I jumped in to rescue him. We were at a new bar in town, opened only a week or two before, a disco-style saloon called Checkers located on the main south shore drag, Sunrise Highway, at the far, far edge of the Rock, between the towns in an isolated, mostly vacant strip of highway. It was becoming a new night hot spot for out-of-towners to gather dressed up like Saturday Night Fever and actually dance; there were no pool tables or dart boards, instead a lit-up dance floor and those stupid, hanging, spinning, mirrored globes, so it wasn't likely to be much fun. We went anyway, dressed to fit in because we wanted to check out the scene and perhaps maybe get lucky with the ladies—however unlikely but still possible. It would actually happen that way for me, but only rarely, like once every blue moon or two, so you never knew, it was always worth a shot. Anyway, shortly after arriving and a drink or two, I came out of the head only to find two or three guys roughing Victim up, so I quickly jumped in and started putting my weight and hands into the mix, really just trying to extract him, which of course led them to turn on yours truly. A half-minute later, we were both on the street outside the place. The bouncers moved in quickly too, but just to get rid of us. No real damage, maybe a torn shirt collar, his or mine, not sure, but that's all. The offended honor, though? Mine? That was real. After reaching his Toyota jalopy parked right across the highway, Victim, who had no honor to offend, suggested we drive

straight to "*your boys at your bar*," meaning the New Village Inn, on the direct opposite side of town. Upon entering "my bar," who do I find but none other than my Luca Brasi, Big Richie and another friendly local acquaintance from high school days, Ed Dillman, the light-haired half-hippie with the denim jeans, jacket and cowboy shirts, known for dealing weed and not afraid to throw fists. Ed hung out mostly with his musician customers, but here tonight, he happened to be playing foosball with my trusty henchman. It's still early, probably only about eleven or eleven thirty on a Saturday night, and they can see we've been roughed up a bit. Right away, they quit the game to come take a closer look at the damage, then asked what happened, but just as I began to explain, Richie interrupted to ask, "*How many?*" "*Seven or eight?*" I guessed, to which both he and Ed immediately re[p]onded, "*Okay. Let's go*," meaning drive back there and settle the score, liven things up at Checkers, and let everyone there know whose town they were actually in. Being outnumbered like that didn't phase them, might not have even registered. Anyway, at that point, I turned to Victim thinking we'll head back together in his car while Richie and Ed go in Ed's, but he right away announces that he's not going, (not up to the task). "*C'mon, what're you kiddin' me?*" I asked, incredulous, to which he responded, "*Why? It's your fight.*" *My fight*, asshole? My fight? Okay. Fine. Fuck you, dipshit. Another Billy Bauer move (Kabbo: Volume I) and another expiration date. Anyway, that wasn't so important at this particular moment because now the three of us, Richie, Ed, and me, headed back there, took the ten-minute drive in Ed's car, entered the bar like it was just another happy-go-lucky night out when I pointed out the ringleader who at the same time recognized me. We quickly massed in the center of the bar, about seven or eight guys in total, where Ed, face to face with the lead jagoff, same height, after a word or two, threw the first punch, landing a solid right dead center to the ringleader's mug, resulting in another brief but chaotic melee, bouncers and a bartender rushing in again and again against us, the unwanted interlopers. This time though, with minor injuries on both sides, and again, mostly to pride. No ambulances or cop cars rushed to the scene; it was over almost as soon as it began. Those out-of-towners thought it was free and over. Now they know better. A price was imposed, at least performatively, before we were again hustled out by the bouncers. The point: no free shots on locals, however, was made. So, the thing is, that's

where I went, The New Village Inn; that's where my "boys" were, and where I didn't even have to ask. They just jumped. Had there been more there then, there more than likely would have been two carloads, maybe even three, maybe even with One Punch Nelson, Ronnie and Merc joining the ad hoc assault team. So despite my derision, Rockville Center's New Village Inn staked a claim on me too.

One of the steady crew was a regular fixture: a local-yokel guy named Ronny. He was a dark-haired, square-jawed Italian American dude who would wear the classic black leather motorcycle jacket even in the summer but without the bike. He drove his parents' car. And wore thick, black-framed eyeglasses. Get it? He didn't know who to try to be. But he had a bit of size to him, shoulders and chest-wise, and occasionally stepped in for the regular bartender, an older, gray-haired, mustached, wire-frame glasses-wearing fatherly gent in his 50s named Walter, whom they called Wally Woowoo, or just *Woowoo*. To some in this crowd that made Ronny a kinda' big deal, as if tending bar made him some type of authority figure. Not to me, though, and to illustrate that point, there was that night drinking with *Horsehead* when after what I interpreted as some type of rude comment or sideways glance, hoisted a full pitcher of beer into their faces, drenching them as they stood shoulder to shoulder behind the bar facing me. Woowoo and Ronny, now a drenched pair of dripping nitwits, did nothing in response, but I waited for them to, letting them see that if they wanted to react? They didn't have to travel far. Both of them. I'm waiting, all five foot nothing of me, right here, *chumps*. Nothing, just dried themselves off while I stood there for a minute or two, seeing that they were going to suck it up this time, and then casually strolled out with a startled but amused *Horse*. Anyway, that was more of me being an obnoxious drunk than a move in a real conflict; I was insulting them back, that's all. I had a well-earned reputation but sensed it was beginning to slip away in their eyes, the recent flow of sarcastic comments or how they looked at me, pausing before speaking as if every word had to be considered because I was some sort of alien outsider that had to be communicated with carefully. Something felt off, the spontaneity of relaxed friendship was gone; they needed reminding of who they were dealing with, and at least for the moment, that not-so-subtle gesture seemed to have restored some of it and

reversed any idea they may have had that I was going soft or would put up with any shit they thought they could hand me. *Wrong! I'll tear your throat out of your neck*. On the plus side, though, as it should be clear, there was no one in that crowd to compete with, be impressed by, or be intimidated by, so, in that sense, it was still easy. Despite that, things began to slowly change around this time, the year I was living on the beach and only occasionally making my way back to the Rock to party on familiar ground, and whatever it was appeared to be irreversible.

They started a New Village Inn Sunday softball team for "bar league" games, as they called them, where during the warm months the regular patrons of local bars get together informally for a friendly game of softball on Sunday afternoons, and I decided to join up. Not that I was going to design and buy a jacket with that team name embossed, whatever it may have been, and I'm not really into any kind of athletics, nor am I especially good at them either. I'm basically, at best, competent enough to play on a bar team without ever bothering to work on improving my skills at chasing balls or whacking them with bats. That type of action hardly thrilled me, but I can still have some fun out there in the field or up at bat. You know, sometimes it's easy to get into the competitive spirit. My last game of touch football, back at age twelve or thirteen, I collided shoulder to shoulder with a much bigger kid, practically dislocating my collar bone. It took months to feel right again. And on the basketball court? At about the same time, reaching up to grab a passed ball bent my finger back so far that it swelled up and hurt for weeks. By then, I understood that I just wasn't built for it. That was clear. If size mattered, and in most competitive sports it matters a lot, then I had to be discreet and choose the *whats*, *whens*, and *hows* with care, like pool or chess, the only two competitions I enjoy at all, and possibly boxing, which I actually do like, a lot, but still, not enough to commit to it. Getting punched in the head more than once or twice, especially unnecessarily, can grow tiresome. I tried the wrestling team back then too, but after two or three practices, when it occurred to me how much time I'd have to spend locked in a tight, combative embrace with a straining, sweating and odorous male body, it made me sick. Forget it. I'm just not into men like that. Co-ed mud wrestling? Well, now we're talkin' about something, but that wasn't on the menu. Anyway, at the end of each game

we were all going to get drunk together, losers buy, and there might even be a few available chicks around, which was the real draw, so there was that. I'm not even sure if Scar or Horse were ever even there. They weren't big on chasing balls or working up any type of sweat for it either; it was more of a sex, drugs and rock'n roll crowd, available mostly in the opposite order, so I was pretty much out there on my own. For some reason, on one of the first or second game days, out there in deep center, I thought I started hearing the word "*Jew*" a lot again. It was only when I was in their company, and that first time was out on the ball field. Not in a directly derogatory or insulting way, but a noticeable comment nonetheless, as they were talking about me, the "*Jew*," as in "*he's the only Jew on the team*" type of remark, like with Denise, and it started to wear on me, being pointed out and isolated like that, my tale and horns on full display for the righteous gentiles to take note of, as if that were an important enough detail to regularly highlight, making me feel less than welcome, and so I began to react to the passive aggressive needling, not directly, not yet, just by laughing it off, but meanwhile setting my radar for a more worthwhile opportunity to make a vivid statement in response. Like with Denise. Who did these fuck-butt losers think they were, anyway? My few Jewish pals and the rest I knew would never even spend five minutes with these cavorting clowns who had exactly zero going on and zero ambition to ever have anything going on, talking about post-office pensions while in their twenties, golf caddies and parking valets, not club members or pro players, so if anything, they should have appreciated my presence, not resented it. Who was I? *Shylock* now? *Meyer Wolfshiem*? *Rob the unrepentant Christ-killer*? Please. My participation alone gave them an added dimension of character and color; at least that's how I saw it, but mine wasn't the only vote.

The first opportunity, a warm-up, came that late spring night, during another barroom conflict, when Ronny was again behind the bar. A few out-of-town dudes came in, and for whatever reason there was friction. Maybe they were a bit loud, maybe they argued about the price of a drink or who stole whose change off the bar; no one knew them, and it was our turf, that kinda' thing. The next thing you know, I'm outside with them shouting back and forth while stalking one or two of them. No blows were thrown, as they were already in slow but steady retreat—not that they seemed afraid, rather they

just didn't want to be bothered. Ronny comes running out from behind the bar, like he doesn't want any more trouble on his watch so he wants to calm things down, and exits the place, heading towards me, not them. My attention was in the opposite direction, on the dudes down the block, so I didn't see or hear him. Then, all of a sudden, I felt arms wrapped tightly around me. It was Ronnie; he grabbed me from behind, bear hug style, pinning my upper arms to my sides, lifted me up off my feet a few inches, and then body slammed me straight down to the ground. Surprised, enraged, but unhurt, I immediately got right back up, turned around, and with a full, wide swing from the right and an open hand, slapped the glasses right off his face, exactly as intended, sending them flying all the way across the street. "*C'mon*," I said, "*let's go!*" Putting my dukes up, ready for combat, preparing to hit harder this time and with a closed fist. With that, his energy and bravado suddenly gone, he quietly squirrels away, heads across the street to pick up his glasses, and retreats back into the bar. I left it at that then, but trouble was coming. That was obvious; much more of it, the *Jew* needed a point to be made that, as of yet, hadn't been and that wasn't it. Rather, it was another warning, but the stakes were growing. Ronnie put his hands on me.

Soon after, it just about came to a head, the expiration date at Scar's apartment a few days or a couple of weeks later, with me, Scar, Horse, and maybe five or six of the other crew, Merc, Ronnie, Scotto, and including one of the other routine regulars, a cartoonish guy they cleverly dubbed "Fat Matt." Guess why? Right. Because of his beer belly and his name was Matthew. The group was casually carousing, indulging in our favorite standby activities: weed, beer, music and small talk, when once again the word came up. Again, not so much overtly hostile as deliberate, singling me out, isolating me as if to remind me I wasn't really one of them. Not that I behaved, dressed or spoke so differently, merely a standard deviation away, not unlike the others, except that to them, in a defining way, it was something innate, endemic, different in my bones, that could not be changed, ever; that was the message. Now this wasn't outside in a public ball field, at the bar, or at one of their homes; it was in Scar's mother's apartment, where all through our high school years we had spent many an evening tanking up with weed and booze, listening to the Allman Brothers

before heading out to bar hop, where I was supposed to be one of the inside men, a close friend of his, and *Horse* was there too, ditto with him. When the word came out, though, during a brief, silent pause, I looked at them, *Horse* and *Scar*, hoping to see or hear one or both of them jump in with a quick response of their own. It couldn't come from me; it had to come from them to have any meaning, a message to the effect of "*Rob's one of us; he's our friend, and that's the way it is, Jew or no Jew, he's Rob,*" and so settle it right there and then, and then we could move on. But that isn't what happened. They said nothing; they just looked back at me. Their faces, their expressions, and their body language all read the same as the others'. All of them, now looking at me, and then it was clear: even to them, the guys I'd been hanging out tight with for years, often almost every night for months at a time, guys that knew almost everything about me, nearly every detail of my life as I did theirs, laughed with, cried to (the Sherry saga, *Kabbo: Volume I*), strengths and weaknesses, victory and defeat, crime and punishment, I was odd man out. I was *not* one of them. I was a *Jew*. Now, *that* hurt. That was a big disappointment, and it changed everything, the expiration date having arrived rather suddenly, unexpectedly, and permanently. At the moment, there didn't seem to be anything for me to say or do. If that's how they felt, well, then that was how they felt. Nothing I could do about it, so I barely reacted, maybe just shrugging my shoulders and keeping on drinking, smoking, or whatever, like it made no difference and I didn't care, but of course it did and I did, and a short while later, that would be demonstrated in a clear and unmistakable way. If they wanted me out, okay, fine, it was their call, so out I would go, but I would choose how and when to leave my mark and make my exit. Stay tuned, clowns.

The closing act, or literal parting shot, came a short time later, perhaps a week or two, on the big Saturday night when the clique migrated to East Rockaway, an adjacent small town, to a local small-town bar called *The Porthole*. The name was inspired by the fact that this quiet little residential village on the south shore of Nassau County was situated along the inlets and canals of Long Island Sound and so had a nautical ambiance. The one-story building, seating about sixty, tops, was right on the shore by the docks, so the fishermen would have a comfortable and convenient place to relax before heading either home or back out to the Sound, and to that end,

it was decorated with those small round windows like on board boats called portholes. Why we were there that night instead of our regular dive was probably just a matter of someone's urge, probably Ronney's, to expand our narrow little social world by occasionally bridging out to a town or two away, bar league territory. There might be better luck with the females there; there might even actually be females there, single ones too. Regardless, the venture was a big deal for that crowd. An out-of-town night out like that was a special occasion type of event, a time to dress up a bit in casual summer trendy wear, and so there I was too, dressed in my own John Travolta *Saturday Night Fever* white, boozing it up along with everyone else in the crowded barroom as fast as we could be served. This guy, Fat Matt, it's not that he was really so fat, he wasn't, it was just that comically bloated beer-belly below his narrow shoulders that drew a lot of attention. Otherwise, he was an average-sized guy in his middle twenties with trendy seventies-style long hair and wide sideburns; your average schmo, but maybe a bit duller and less articulate than the rest of the New Village Inn crowd, who came off kinda' stupid or slow, which in this group was fine, on top of being a bit unintentionally clownish, which occasionally made him somewhat entertaining in a drunken, moronic kind of way. He was pretty easy to unhinge too; that was the really fun part. For example, *Horse* would annoy him by shaking his hand, like, say, every five or ten minutes, finding some obvious excuse—"good job, ordering that drink"—and shaking his hand in ridiculous mock congratulations, or again, "great job, parking in the lot"—making it seem semi-legit, but by the fourth or fifth go round, and since it was intended to slowly piss him off to the point where eventually he'd erupt with exasperation and give us a chuckle, finally he'd bellow out demanding to know: "*Why you [sic] keep shaking my hand for???*"—which *Horse* would then exaggerate and mimic, bringing hysterics to all—except, of course, to Fat Matt, who seemed utterly incapable of sensing any irony or laughing at himself.

Anyway, we never had any words, he and I, not one way or another, and I didn't give half a fuck about him one way or another either, beyond his being the butt of *Horse's* occasional light-hearted mockery, so I had no clear idea how or why he became so suddenly enraged by me. My impression was that he probably mindlessly absorbed the thoughts and

attitudes the rest of them began expressing among themselves directed towards me, that I was not welcome or one of them, and it had something to do with my ethnicity, which is why he seemed to out of nowhere direct his intense vulgar ire at me. While standing close to him in the tight space between one end of the bar and an outer wall, maybe only a foot or two away in the crowded space, he turned toward me and began shouting: "*you fucken Guinea! You fucken Guinea! You fucken Guinea!*" Of course, he meant *Jew*, but again, a rather simple-minded fellow, a dim bulb, now a drunken dim bulb, it wasn't surprising he got the ethnicity wrong, but I got it right. He was speaking, or rather shouting at me for them, most if not all, but this time with open hostility, hatred, and rage, which apparently had been building beneath the surface of half-smiles and happy talk. I'd done nothing to him, ever, aside laugh along with everyone else at *Horse's* playful ragging on him. I never even added to it. *Horse* didn't need my help. But that was it. Showtime. No voice needed. None came. Not a word from me either. Now the "*fucken guinea*" would respond to all of it. He's already perfectly in range, half a head taller, back to the wall, inches from the porthole window behind him, **BANG!** I blasted him with a ferocious overhead right, a haymaker, dead center in his face, shattering his nose with my fist and as a bonus sending his head smashing right through the glass behind him, slicing open the skin covering the back of his skull with the fragmented shards of pane. Now there was blood all over the place, instantly, including drenching my formerly pristine *Saturday Night Fever* whites. Well? Now it was *exit stage right* time, time to split before any legal complications arrived, as they surely would, and take my leave of not only East Rockaway but of almost that entire clique of former drinking buddies, and not with no kinda' passive-aggressive whimper or pointless self-pity but with a clear and direct, outspoken bang. What now? In the gory drunken glory of my blood-soaked suit, I traveled all night by way of public transportation all the way to Brooklyn. He might not have made it; there was a lot of blood; these things can happen, so off *to grandmother's house I'd go* for refuge and let her see my blood-soaked glory. Except when I got there early that morning, she wasn't home, probably off on one of her own adventures, so instead I took a leisurely stroll to the boardwalk in Coney Island, where I paraded on the promenade, proudly showing off the evidence of my menacing prowess. And if any more satisfaction was

needed, I caught a glimpse of him one afternoon, a week or so later, outside a convenience store not far from the scene of the crime, his face all plastered and bandaged up, two black eyes, looking like a raccoon dressed as a mummy. Bad. Good, they all saw it too: Wally Woowoo, Ronny, Scotto, Burns, Rodent, Gizmundi, his sister, Merc, Big Richie, Ed Dillman, as well as *Horse* and Scar, the whole lot of them, basically the entire collection of *me-go-to-parties* Phi Beta Kappa regulars at Rockville Center's New Village Inn and beyond, where everyone now understood that the "*Jew's*" point in response, *fuck you too*, had fully, clearly, and finally been delivered.

Friendships expire, friendships are born

Hickey and I kept in contact after that two-week drill, and though my career as a sailor was done, our friendship was just getting started. I filled him in on the whole story about Nimitz in San Diego, the demerits in boot camp, the discharge, the snatched ID card and the letter, which probably only elevated me further in his esteem. *Who does that?* Sneaks back in? Only one crazy cat he'd met would ever even think of that, and that crazy cat was his new Long Beach pal, the guy who tried rushing past him up the gangway with sand in his ears in Old San Juan, then started a race riot on board underway, and a Jewish guy no less. So he invited me to come out to his Rockaway Beach neighborhood to meet his family, his girlfriend, and the local roughneck boys he hung out with there in that hard-edged, tightly bound, Irish-Catholic white ghetto.

That Saturday afternoon when I showed up, the whole family, minus the father, happened to be home: his two or three sisters and five or six brothers, maybe more, so many Hickeys, too many to keep track of right off the start. These folks were Catholics to the core. Deep catholicism. Bone deep. There was no birth control. Instead, they had kids on top of kids, like observant Jews and lots of them. Jimmy must have told them some tall tales about me because they treated me like I was some kind of VIP, but at least to one of them, a VIP that needed testing. I'll get to that in a minute. There were at least three brothers, including Jimmy, the first-born, who were in my age range, late teens and early twenties, the youngest of whom,

Eugene, a light-haired, light-eyed and thin kid with a potentially menacing look to his smile, like he'd smile while choking you to death, circumspect eyes, possibly one of the wildest of them, had several fingers from one of his hands blown off by holding on to lit firecrackers for too long before they went off during a game of chicken, which, due to the price he paid, a contest I hope at least he won. He was also the most vocal, friendly too, but not entirely convinced that this so-called wild man was all his older brother put him up to be, and he politely let me know that pretty much right away, that day with a ritual challenge reserved for those that needed testing, a local right of passage ritual. Timmy, the second oldest just behind Jimmy, was clearly an alpha male gangster type, or an up-and-coming one. To him, I was introduced by Jimmy when he opened the door to his kid brother's bedroom without bothering to knock, exposing me to a bedded couple lying about comfortably within, Timmy and one of his Playboy bunny squaws. Tall, much taller than the rest, over six feet, dark-haired, powerfully-built, unsmiling and wearing Porsche sunglasses and a seventies style cap in bed, driving a brand-new, super-charged, fast, black TransAm convertible, enjoyed a full harem of ladies, all super-fine as well, and dealt professionally, probably wholesale, the forbidden substance, contraband, marijuana. It is almost certain he had other avenues of financial travel as well, but I made no inquiries; it was his business, not mine, so there was no point in getting involved, other than acknowledging the suggestion from Jimmy that he could satisfy that weed desire should I express it. There was no invitation to friendship, not even by way of a challenge or any other indicator of interest in me, aside from the fact that I was Jimmy's friend from the navy, which was fine. I was here to hang with my pal who never lost a fight. His brothers were accouterments, that's all, and, except for Eugene they needed nothing from me.

All these guys were, in a working-class sense, born-made men. Their father, known for some unknown reason as Brother, was a hot shot in the Sandhog's union, meaning that his sons got their "book" on their eighteenth birthday. I doubt if any kind of probationary period or apprenticeship was needed. They were Brother's kids, end of that story, and as such were probably in line for no-show or seldom-show union jobs with the full package of benefits, i.e., set for life. But for those, they had to perform and

prove themselves as worthy men for a while on their own, at least a couple of years to make their bones, so to speak. They'd have to get down in the dirt beneath the water and dig, blow stuff up, like huge granite boulders and dig again, then build some more, then repeat. The Sandhogs, a nickname for the tunnel builders' union, built the underground channels connecting Long Island, including the boroughs of Queens and Brooklyn, to the jewel in the crown, Manhattan, and when there weren't tunnels being built (there are only two on the New York side), they somehow managed to stay solvent, even having some thrills and joy, booze and broads, fistfights for fun, feeding, clothing and housing a large family and church every Sunday. Aside from state-funded unemployment? How they swung it? I didn't know and, again, content to let it remain a mystery, never asked. No one was bringing my name up for membership anyway, and my impression was that it's pretty much a closed shop, and probably a fairly heterogeneous one at that, so to me, the point of it all, except for a glimpse into another exotic world just across the Queens/Nassau border, was moot at the start, and again, it was just about hanging with Seaman Hickey and strengthening that bond, having him in mind for one of my own personal torpedoes, along with the unwavering Big Richie, and another young, tough-guy, close neighbor in Long Beach named Henry, another white semi-pro boxing badass with an equally badass German Shepherd named Jake, who barked but never wagged his tail. These guys were among the chief prospects for my own future plans, which included trucking, a team of players amounting to a stout crew, and a company, so there was both a method and an objective to my madness. It was about befriending and impressing them by demonstrating my capacity for risk, presenting myself as fearless, loyal, dependable and cunning, and thus keeping them on my side.

On the other hand, young Eugene—pardon the pun—yeah, he wanted to test me. It was a clear and warm Saturday afternoon, with bright summer sunshine and a gentle breeze off the saltwater. Despite the odor of melting tar, oil and gasoline, there were plenty of kids on the street: riding bikes, yelling, laughing, dodging cars, hanging out on stoops, girls jumping rope, teenagers on corners play fighting for the girls, blasting radios or eight-tracks, a lotta' Springsteen, not much Simon and Garfunkel, lotta' Smokey Robinson, The Four Seasons, KC and The Sunshine Band, but not much

Lennon and McCartney or Grateful Dead. Taken as a whole, they combined to create a perfect mix, serving as the soundtrack to raucous urban traffic, the barking dogs, crying babies, screaming children, and the regular screeching of the elevated A train directly overhead. To the north, there was the Runaway Channel, and to the south, the Atlantic. The Rockaways were a long and narrow strip of land, like Long Beach, only saturated with working class and aspiring working-class citizens and all the life energy they brought and supported. Gene and his comrades and pals gathered around me and Jimmy in the tiny patch of dirt behind their tenement walk-up they called a backyard, strewn with discarded toys, dolls, fire trucks, a deflated basketball, hockey sticks, some broken, motor parts, tires, rusting bicycles, small dead animal remains and cigarette butts, and asked me if I was willing to come along with them to jump off a bridge and swim to shore. It was a preliminary test, just to see if there was anything at all substantive backing up their older brother's enthusiasm, so the answer had to be clear and quick right away. "Yeah, sure," thinking: *I can swim and I can jump too, so why not?* Let's go! Now, truth be told, upon hearing the word "bridge," an image came to mind of a narrow footbridge crossing a brook or a stream, like in middle-class Island Park or Harbor Isle, something relatively low to the surface and manageable, towering maybe ten feet or so above the gently running water's surface with goldfish and lily pads prettying it up, like a page out of Mark Twain. In part, this accounted for my immediate and positive response, but when the five or six of us, with Jimmy coming along to witness the affirming spectacle, left the backyard and started marching up Rockaway Beach Boulevard, past the high school and the McDonalds, the imposing reality came into view. This was no footbridge over a bubbling brook in New Milford with goldfish and lily pads; it was the Broad Channel Bridge supporting a four-lane highway, a quarter mile long, spanning Jamaica Bay, the outlet to the ocean. At the edge closest to shore, where the first of many pylons stood, they were easily three stories tall at a minimum. Now what? *You guys got to be kidding me*, I thought but didn't say, *this bridge? What is this? The Olympics? A Navy Seal try-out?* Turns out that for the Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn boys of Rockaway Beach, it was a routine summer ritual they all practiced regularly and had no fear of. They did it for fun and thrills. Except for Jimmy, *Mr. I Never Lost a Fight*, who declined time and again to take the leap, a decision totally

uncharacteristic of this fearless son-of-a-big-shot Sandhog union boss, no explanation offered either, but that's what it was, and I was already committed to the initiation exercise, so there was no choice but to go through with it lest the entire endeavor, my face, and our friendship be squandered, abandoned and aborted just as it was kicking in and probably forever.

Marching up the steep, foot-worn path of gravel, rock, dirt, weeds, and sand to the near side of the bridge, where it left the shore and began its expanse across the channel, we headed to its closest edge, entering under the first horizontal cable then over the knee-high concrete barrier to the actual steel, iron, and asphalt footpath of the bridge itself, which ran its entire length alongside the roadway. Once the squad was fully assembled, they turned to me, including Jimmy, as if to say, *here we are; now let's go*. At that point, now concerned that I might blindly take the leap only to land on something hard and unyielding hidden beneath the cold gray surface, like a huge block of concrete with rusted rebar running through and out of it, or boulders, or a sunken something else unseen, hard and unforgiving, when it would be bye-bye birdie for keeps, calmly announced that I wanted to see Eugene go first, that way I could see that they were for real and that this wasn't just some kind of crazy Rockaway set-up, and at the same time see where to aim my jump by going for approximately the same spot where he lands. If he lived, so might I. "*No problem*," the reply, so Eugene strips off his shirt and sneakers, then takes the short step to the edge, where right, zero hesitation, away he leaps. Down he drops, completely overcome by gravity, but effortlessly, like eating candy on a merry-go-round. I watched him hit the water; lots of force heard at that impact, another cause for concern. This was not a precision pearl dive; no, it was more of a quick-short step and a letting go, surrendering the next five or ten seconds to nature and fate. After a quiet moment, maybe another five seconds, and after being swallowed whole by the murky, cold water, he rose back up to the surface, spitting, snorting and laughing, looked up at us and yelled, "*Jump!*" So now it was my turn, and with that, that's exactly what I was about to do.

All that was left was to follow suit, strip off my shirt and shoes, and look down from this alarming height, much higher than I'd ever dove, or jumped,

or even imagined diving or jumping from, adrenaline pumping so fast and hard the surge could be felt in every cell in my body, said a quiet *Shma Yisrael*, and now resolved, performed the hardest, essential part, the stepping off the bridge. All you really need to do is make the decision. “*I’m going to do this.*” Once that’s done, it basically just happens. A cautious step forward followed by a gentle jump, like squeezing a trigger, the tough decision is followed by the easy gesture, just enough will to get past the edge of resistance, then down you go, all the force of gravity needed to take you the rest of the way. Just try to stay upright, vertical if possible, to limit the surface area of your body so the landing impact is mostly felt by the bottoms of your feet, not your head, face, abdomen, or back. And there it was, the amazing impact, much more powerful than anticipated. It felt like an explosion, ka-WAAAAP!!! Potentially crippling, if not outright deadly, should you land just slightly the wrong way, of which, of course, there are infinite varieties and ways. My upper lip felt the smashing impact too, as did the bottoms of my feet. It was more surprising than painful, stunning actually, but survivable. And then the immediate follow through, like a torpedo shot out of a canon, the force of the drop pulling me down below the surface, probably about ten or fifteen feet to where I opened my eyes and looked upwards to see the light above the surface, and then began a rapid ascent, helping it along with some tight kicking and crawling swim maneuvers. It was only a matter of seconds, five or six at most, before breaking the surface and beginning to breathe again, picking up my breathing just before the jump. I’d done it, passed the first test, and so, in my book, that was enough, certainly for today, the first time we ever met, the Hickey clan and me. Anything else they might need done by way of proving myself would have to come with an explicit and worthwhile guarantee of meaningful reward. Whatever the case, there would be a price tag. I acknowledged what had to be proved as a local freshman, and proved it was. I wasn’t going to get any of my fingers blown off for a Rockaway Beach merit badge, so I’m passing the rest for now, but after this reckless stunt, my friendship with Jimmy could proceed. He knew I was headed to Florida to seek working capital and more adventure as a Miami or Lauderdale bartender, or maybe even some type of *gigolo*, or combination thereof, and that the plan was to come back, maybe two or three or more years from now, enriched sufficiently to make a downpayment on a co-op,

condo or house and begin stage two, a property owner with a trucking business, *Arkay Trucking*, and that was when our active friendship would commence. The trucking company was going to need a lieutenant and he, because of his brains, blue-eyed Irish good looks, confidence and brawn, appreciation of me, and the quiet, authoritative command he demonstrated while standing guard, was a top candidate, but this was a while off, for now I had another journey to take.

The Long Beach wrap-up

The summer of ‘79 was in full gear: trucking with Jimmy D most days, delivering pizza most nights, hustling odd jobs here and there, all with varying perqs, liabilities and outcomes, and, of course, bedding down the ladies with every chance that came my way—a steady full-time pursuit all on its own. One night, I ran out on one of my east-side, on the boardwalk, crazy-house night time security jobs (not the Promenade). That time, in the wee hours, amid the roaring wind of a thunder and lightning storm, I began seeing a few of the resident undead crazies roaming around between the shadows of the decaying, moth-eaten, sickly-smelling, and moldy lobby, from behind the floor-to-ceiling drapes, back and around the columns, and through the opening of an elevator. I thought I heard them, but none emerged, now seeming more like nightmare phantoms than livin’ folk, i.e., breathing people. To say it was unnerving, even frightening at times, would not be an overstatement. One of the key responsibilities they assigned to security men was to go down into the dank, lifeless, pitch-dark, and silent basement (except for the glow of the furnace and scurrying rats and cobwebs) and turn on the furnace at a given hour, like at 4 a.m. for some technical reason. This was a creepy exercise under any circumstances, even during daylight hours; *Chiller Theater*-style ambience; Twilight Zone material; but now? Imagine the lightning momentarily illuminating the horror of the Bates Motel—not on a distant screen but right there, live, in your face. Regardless, it was always pitch black and silent down there, except for the glow of fire coming from inside the humming drum once it got going, and I had to work up the nerve before each trip just to get close enough to turn on the light at the top of the blacked-out stairwell leading down there.

Just getting to that point required a walk or two down long, empty, dark, cobwebbed, and rat infested corridors. On this particular night, amid the crackling thunder and howling rain, and after the two or three visits from *The Night of the Living Dead* film extras doing silent walk-ons in the lobby, entering and exiting quietly from shadow to shadow, there was no way I was going down there. No way. It wasn't them that scared me so much; it was my imagination, and that I couldn't overcome, barely even bothering to try, figuring even if I held my nerve long enough to get down there, what if I lost it then? Forget it. Not tonight. Not for this money, three-fifty an hour or whatever it was. In fact, not ever again because I spooked enough to call the owners and tell'm: "Sorry, boss, but I'm outa' here now. Better send someone else to turn on that oven 'cause it ain't gonna be me, babe, no, no, no, it ain't me babe, I'm going home," and then outa' there I went. Not cool. I get it. I blew a paycheck too, and a bit of reputation as well, I guess. Word would get out among the facility owners. It wasn't my first spot. They trusted me up until then, and they all knew each other and shared that type of information. But at least they gota' call and could come turn on the furnace and deal with the resident Addams family of crazies themselves if it was really that damn important *right just the fuck now*, thus ending my boardwalk security guard career with a forceful enough whimper.

The thing about the pizza delivery job was that you got to meet a lot of local people, often again and again, regular customers, which is generally a good thing. Having a hot, fresh pizza pie delivered to your door is a happy event, so when you meet them, in effect, you are bringing them a measure of joy. A byproduct of that is the opportunity to create a good first impression on folks, and so it was often the case, despite my rambunctiousness in other settings. This was decent, fun and honest work, and so respectable enough for a twenty-year-old living by the seat of his pants by the edge of the sea, literally hand to mouth, paying his own way in life, at, by middle-class American standards, a relatively young age. One of the Long Beach families that connected with this young hustler were the Shapiros. They were a retired couple, both stylish in their own way: she, with her still-shapely figure and perfectly dyed orange hair, and he, trim and well-dressed with his gold jewelry and manicured hands, ordering freshly prepared gourmet meals to their two-story, brick and slate home by the bay.

I had no idea what business they were in and never asked, but it was easy to see they were comfortable—not by any means wealthy, but apparently well off enough financially not to have daily worries and enjoy retirement in good health. By the second or third delivery, the tips were improving, and the side conversations were lengthening and broadening. I guess they looked at me, a fellow *Landsman*, like a nephew or grandchild, and began thinking of ways to help me earn a few more bucks since they knew I was hustling honest work and always available for any odd jobs I could actually do. They came up with the idea that since their outside front steps needed some maintenance and repair—a few of the bricks were either loose or crumbling—maybe they'd ask me if I was interested in taking on that task. This way they could help me out a bit and at the same time be useful to them, the old highest form of charity principle: "Give a man a fish; feed him for the day. Teach a man to fish and feed him for a lifetime," attributed to the wisdom of the great *Rambam*, Moses ben Maimonides.

Having had some experience in general construction with Jackhammer Dave, specifically mixing concrete and using a trowel to spread it, and having him as a resource to give me a quick primer and loan me the tools, my answer was affirmative. Thanks. Sure. Let's give it a go. Whatever they agreed to pay me, or offered to pay me, was gonna be fine, so after checking in with Dave, I headed to the lumber yard, picked up the material, and went to work the next day. It was a simple enough task, not exactly microsurgery, and at the end of the day or two it took to get it done, I completed the task, impressing them and even myself a bit. The bricks were in the right places, and the cement held. Success! This episode led them to offer to sell me a car they had in their garage that they no longer needed and had taken off the road. There were no plates or insurance cards to go along with the deal (I never asked), but the car was in peak running condition and the thing was gorgeous, spectacular. Not sure which year, but it was a 98 *Oldsmobile*, a bronze-colored sedan with a black roof and black interior, power everything, a beautiful AM/FM with powerful speakers, front and back, and at least a 350 eight-cylinder, not a dent or scratch on her or a lick of rust. It was love at first sight; as soon as they opened the garage door, it was *wow, holy macaroni, for me?* Then, after a quick test drive, the pizza delivery guy and part-time mason was hooked. *Sold!* Again, I'm not

sure how much they asked, but it was affordable, practically a giveaway, so there was no haggling or bargaining, no need, just gratitude, and the deal was done, cash paid in full. Plates were no problem either. Worst-case scenario? I'd just (*ahem*) borrow someone else's, that is, take them off another car. The parking lots at night were full of them, and all you needed was a screwdriver and a few minutes in the shade to secure them, but I still had the ones from my first set of wheels, the oil-leaking purple monster, so once again they served their purpose. And wallah! Now I had wheels, nice ones too, and I was so proud I drove them all around my old neighborhood whenever possible, even Oceanside, where I might be spotted by *you-know-who* (Kabbo: Volume I) finding one excuse or another to be there, attempting to obscure the true purpose of just showing off. After all, me in cool wheels? This was a first.

The summer was just about past the halfway point, and my lease was coming up for renewal, but I had those other plans and ideas. The nomadic urge was creeping back. It had been almost a year since setting roots down on the beach, and though it felt a little like home, despite or maybe because of all the *crazy*, home for me in the broader sense was still the road. Movement. Travel. The unknown and the road. The idea was to drive that baby down to the *Sunshine State*, get a job in a hotel, restaurant, or bar, and live the nightlife at work while saving money. If you worked at a bar, especially in a fancy hotel or nightclub on the beach, I figured, well, you were always at a party and could probably party there yourself, almost for free, maybe even getting paid for it, and at the same time, meet plenty of cool and prosperous people who could help lift up a hard-working young guy on his own, like the Shapiros did. That would also mean money could be saved for my next adventure, like, as I told Hickey, coming back to Long Beach and buying an apartment or two, one to live in and the other to rent out, and helping pay for them both while going back into trucking, this time on my own. It might take a couple of years, but at not quite twenty-one, who cares about that? And as I said, best of all, it would surely be a *lota'* fun.

Coincidentally, old man Gade the landlord, he wanted to buy me out of the remaining month or so of the lease. Not sure exactly why, but they probably found another tenant that would pay a lot more than they were getting from

me for the second half of the summer, so the old guy brought it up and presented an offer. Possibly, it might also be that he saw me with the rifle outside, in the front, where I often sat and cleaned it, letting the neighborhood know and sending a not-so-subtle message to the Golden Glover. I'm sure it looked a bit nutty; no one else in Long Beach was ever doing anything like that, brandishing a firearm in public, or anything even remotely like that. It wasn't exactly moose country or the backwoods of West Virginia; it wasn't even red-neck Suffolk County, but to many it was a red flag, that's for sure. At the same time, though, it's not at all illegal, so *too bad if you didn't like it* was my attitude. It had a purpose. One of my neighbors, a young, hip-looking professional guy, maybe a lawyer or schoolteacher, who lived on the second floor with his wife, saw me at it, polishing the barrel, caressing the scope and stock, one late afternoon when he was getting home from work, and after ascending the single outdoor stairway, before entering his apartment, turned around and called out: "*Hey Rob. Do us a favor, please. If you see anyone around here that looks suspicious, shoot them for us, will ya'?*" He said it so matter-of-factly and so dryly that we both cracked up at the obvious absurdity of the scene—my absurdity. There wasn't a moose in sight. But there was a serious purpose behind the absurdity and humor. The purpose was to continue signaling my preparedness to defend myself and my home against any and all of the local bad-guy enemies, real or imagined, from imaginary Nazis to the all-too-real bison to the varmints of the *Arizona* and the quarterback, a steadily mounting potential hit-list as a result of my regular, wild night craziness, raising the ante, raising it sky high, which was exactly where I felt it belonged. What was lacking in subtlety was made up for in clarity. Perhaps the Gades noticed too, but they, the property owners, weren't laughing, so maybe it was both: a better offer and losing Daniel Boone, the madman downstairs, at the same time. There was the time a few months before when I accidentally fired a shot in the apartment, inches from my foot. Luckily, it was aimed at the concrete floor when it happened, so there was no real damage. It buried itself deep in the cement, probably halfway to China, but the sound of the explosive blast and the stench of the burning gunpowder were hard to miss. Though no one came to investigate, it still *musta'* registered. Close call. Anyway, there was a financial incentive on the table: a full refund of the security deposit and a break in the current

month's rent, something like that, maybe even a refund, and since my plans included leaving Long Beach anyway, a road trip in my jet of super cool new wheels, figured *why not?* Out with the old, in with the new. Right? So, let's take the money and run, and still, at not even twenty-one, the voice returned to say, "*Vamanos!*"

With that, I liquidated what could be sold or given away, threw out the rest, and packed what was needed into the trunk, including my trusty .350 Remington, tucked my documentation and cash—a few hundred saved—into the glove compartment and moved into the vehicle, intending to stay there, sleeping in parking lots behind shopping centers while making the rounds to show off the beautiful Olds and say my goodbyes before hitting the road, 95 South all the way to Lauderdale or Miami Beach, whichever grabbed me first.

After only three or four nights as a semi-hobo sleeping in the back seat of his car, using gas station toilets to wash up, bird-bath showers, and the like, most of the *goodbyes* had been said, to mom, Jackhammer Dave, Jimmy D and the boys at *Amalfi* and *Bel-Aire*. And while at it, definitely making sure to be seen by that crowd of Nobel Prize-winning Olympic contenders and Oscar nominees at the New Village (Idiot) Inn by making slow, repeated rounds up and down the road in front of it, windows open, stereo blasting out great tunes, so the vehicle was on display for those that needed to see it. That included, of course, whatever lady friends that currently inhabited my world, ones I had or was angling to have, so, there wasn't much else left to do beyond taking a last joy-ride around familiar parts of the south shore before hitting the highway southbound, and southbound far.

That last night it was raining, a warm, steady summer rain after a hot and steamy day, so my windows were rolled up, air conditioning on and grooving to the great sound system blasting the great Steve Miller's masterpiece *Space Cowboy* on my favorite local, hippie-run, non-commercial FM station, WLIR, "*Let me tell you people that I found a new way and I'm tired of all this talk about love...*" Damn straight. Forget love; I want money. I want freedom. I want to roll. Life was shaping up nicely, it seemed. Heading east on Merrick Road, a main commercial thoroughfare,

keeping within the speed limit at about 35 mph, no need to rush anywhere—on my left side, in the inside lane of a busy four-lane, I noticed a car heading in the same direction, and it felt a little closer than felt right. Looking over my shoulder to check out what's up, I see it's more old school pals from the Rock, guys I missed on my farewell tour. They were excited and happy to see me, and surprised at the same time, it was *Kabbo* behind the wheel, cool wheels. Now we're all smiles and waves, the windows of both cars now rolled down to hear each other. That's when I decided to give the gas pedal a little extra tap to demonstrate that she wasn't just beautiful but powerful too. She lunges forward just as I planned but then suddenly spins out of control, just as I hadn't. "*Hydroplaning*," they call it, and I wasn't familiar enough with her to know not to tap her like that on the slick, oily surface, but by the time she finished her three-sixty spins and slammed into a row of parked cars, I was. My buddies either didn't see it or didn't care, as they just kept going. And now she won't budge. Either tangled up in steel or a disconnected fuel pump, whatever it was, she ain't moving. If all that weren't enough *crazy*, it was half a block from my old stomping grounds, the place I'd visited on more than one memorable and auspicious occasion, the Baldwin First Precinct House. Just perfect. It couldn't have been timed better. Fortunately, if that's the right word, I'm unhurt. Nothing, not a scratch, but definitely in emergency response mode. In a few short minutes, the cops will be all over the scene, and those irritating minor details like the stolen plates, no insurance, inspection, or registration requirements will probably come up, and it will probably turn out bad for me, from real bad to much worse bad, like *jail again* bad, especially now that I've whacked a couple of parked cars. So, thinking quickly, shifting into survival mode, opened the glove compartment, removed the contents—my wallet, paperwork, and cash—and then, you guessed it, fled the scene as quickly as I could, no last glances or second thoughts. In an instant, out of practically nowhere, everything was gone, including my rifle and all the other property, like all the clothes I had in the world and whatever else I thought to take with me. Back to square one with only a few hundred bucks and whatever I was wearing, and now, again, best of all? No place to call home. Not even the backseat of a car parked in the shadows. Practically homeless, exactly like I swore to never again be after that stint on the skids in LA (*Kabbo: Volume I*), the curse of the *park bench* once again looming.

The train to the plane...

That was the rhythmic jingle advertising JFK's new express way to travel to and from the city and airport: "*Take the train to the plane—Take the train to the plane.*" And it was stuck now in my head, repeating itself over and over, a message hard to misinterpret or dismiss, and that's where I was headed anyway, so that's exactly what I did. From the accident scene, I ran across the street and down the block, maybe 75 yards away, and hid, crouching down in the thick shrubbery of someone's backyard, where I could see what was happening but not be seen. Sure enough, within minutes, in fact, by the time I positioned myself, they were already on it, lights flashing and the road blocked off. There was no time to lose, having no idea what else might have been left behind that would have clued them in to my identity. The rifle could probably be traced to me, being that it was purchased from a legitimate, licensed dealer using my own name, anything, and the VIN number to the previous owners, the Shapiros, who would probably give me up. Or maybe they'd set up a dragnet and try to catch me, so there wasn't much time to waste before making my way to the local train station, only a few minutes' careful dash across the highway, a fugitive on the run, just like Gibbs Williams predicted a few short years before (Kabbo: Volume I), trying to keep my profile low while moving faster than normal, helped by the rain, because that's what people do when caught in it, so I kept moving until I reached the upper level of the local LIRR station, where I jumped on the next quick train headed towards my dependable sanctuary and refuge, *the city*, figuring that if I can get away now, I can get away forever.

By the time the train pulled into Penn Station and I emerged from the underground caverns and halls onto the streets, the sun had already begun rising. It was a quiet Sunday morning, and for the first time, the city seemed strange and remote to me, not the crazy, tolerant, dangerous, yet familiar and forgiving place it always was. It felt more like it had turned its back on me, and I was lost, alone, the Mark of Cain, empty and without, in desperate need of a change, a big one. Next stop would be the airport, "the train to the plane," JFK, and buying a ticket to Fort Lauderdale, where I planned to be anyway, where I'd get away, pick up the shattered pieces, and begin again. What else was there to do? I wasn't gonna jump off the

Empire State Building, let myself get caught, or turn myself in; rather, I was gonna get away and keep going. What else was there? Once the ticket was purchased and while waiting to board, I called *Horsehead's* house. He had already moved down to Florida a few weeks before, a quick and quiet escape of his own not long after the chemist's car fiasco, and was staying with an uncle somewhere in or near Lauderdale. His sister picked up the phone. She knew who I was, so she gave me the address where she said he could be found but not the phone number, which she claimed not to have. It was odd, but their whole family was odd like that, secretive about the mundane details of everyday life (see Kabbo: Volume I). So with that and the clothes on my back and a nightmare in my head, shadowed now by a dark and ominous cloud of terrible loss and sadness held over from last night's rain, I continued on my journey down south, to where I hoped to wake up, start again, and find some new light and with it a new day in the next Promised Land, the so-called Sunshine State.

Chapter V: *the Sunshine State*

Man, that first bright morning with the blazing hot sun in my face and eyes was as rude as I could stand it, reminding me of everything I didn't want to see or know; still reeling in shock from fate's rapid reversal, that skid, that stupid, fucking unnecessary skid, ruined nearly everything, the universe itself was denying me any place to hide from my pain. I wanted it "*painted black, black as coal, black as night*" not "*we'll sing in the sunshine*." By the late afternoon, after spending the earlier part of the day exploring the downtown shoreline, I sought refuge on a shady bar stool at The Chicago Brass Rail, a bar I wandered into just off the seaside strip in Fort Lauderdale. It looked like a businessman's or professional's after-work spot with a polished mahogany bar, fancy napkins, and soft lights—a cocktail hour kind of place, with Sinatra on the jukebox and Burt Bacharach sung by Dionne Warwick, or the Fifth Dimension, so I couldn't imagine why I chose it, except as a means to momentarily escape from the dude who recklessly slammed his whole life into a row of parked cars. In there, I could be someone else, so I sat down and ordered a drink.

I tried to look the part of a local Joe. In fact, I'd already bought some fitting clothes, a couple of sports shorts, a bathing suit, light but muted Florida pastels, and two or three polo shirts, Sears style with alligators or tennis racket logos, sneakers, and a brand new Li'l General toothbrush and a glittering tube of fresh paste. That task was first on the agenda after leaving the two-bit, one-story motel near the airport where I had slept the first night south of the Mason-Dixon, and, surprisingly, rather deeply, given the circumstances. When I woke, still wondering what the fuck happened, but in a strange sense I felt almost liberated, like starting from scratch again and again was familiar territory, and I'd figure things out as events unfolded by just continuing forward as though everything was still right on schedule. I still had a few precious hundred on me, so there was no immediate cause for panic. But by late afternoon, wandering around downtown near the

beach where the action was supposed to be, things appeared to be pretty desolate, almost lifeless. There were no signs of the wild, topless, teenage pom-pom princesses I hoped to have made the scene with in my instantly loved, then quickly lost, '98 Olds, the outside atmosphere mirroring the hollowness and pain I was managing on the inside. So, despite the wardrobe and residual faith, man, did it suck. It felt almost as bad as the crushing winter loneliness of the Kansas City bus terminal at 4 a.m. (Kabbo: Volume I), but at least not with the darkness and cold to crank up the agony and drill you down into nothingness with it. Here, despite the rude introduction, at least it was warm and sunny, which are no small things, especially when you find yourself "*down and out, when you're on the streets*," as per Paul Simon yet again. No small things at all, so, despite the inherent gloom, another day had arrived.

Why that particular bar and what exactly I might have been looking for there escapes me. My regular watering hole preference was more blue-collar, north-east urban coast than southern rural redneck, more a rough house, Long Island cowboy saloon type of atmosphere, with custom vans and pickups in the parking lots and maybe a Harley or two, with Charlie Daniels, Elton John, and the Stones on the jukebox, than a southern rodeo-style, back-of-the-barn, hayseed slaughterhouse, and this place was neither. But with the new clothes, a recent haircut and a few bucks, I wanted to see if I might pass as a sane, young, aspiring regular. And, yeah, it was a place like this where I thought to find employment—where a New Yorker on his way up might fit, so that's probably why. Well, not much happened; barely anyone paid me any mind, but it was only day one, and I wasn't asking for a job; I just sat there nursing an expensive beer or two while staring at myself in the barroom mirror, still wondering what the fuck happened, how did it all end so fast, out of nowhere, everything gone, and contemplating my next possible move. I was technically homeless again and needed to find shelter before employment. The motel was deeply depressing for all the obvious reasons; it was a loser's retreat, and I could get out of there by budgeting a move and working quickly and decisively. The next morning, waking again in the seedy strip mall motel after having failed to make it to home plate (hers), the chick, the slightly older, more locally seasoned, foxy brunette cocktail waitress I'd given all my attention, a modified tale of woe, and tip

money to the night before at The Rail, and though I got some sympathy, there was no invitation, so, little return for my investment. Instead, I returned to the bare-bones hospitality of the Motel 6 by the airport and cut my losses. With that, the gigolo fantasy was off to a disappointing start. The next option appeared to be the standard default Plan B, i.e., legitimate employment, actual work. With that timely realization, I went at it right away, on day two. If not? I'd be broke in a week or two at this rate, so, not wanting to repeat my downtown LA vagrant drama (Kabbo: Volume I), there was no time to spare. That meant searching for an actual job by picking up a local free classified paper, *Help Wanted*, and then, with it, starting to make payphone calls from luncheonettes, motels, and gas stations, listening carefully while scribbling details on note scraps.

Room for rent

Well, turns out there were plenty. Quite a few retired folks were renting out spaces in their modest but comfortable homes, many of them less than a mile from the shore, still east of 95. (As far as I was concerned, anything west of 95 up to a mile or so from the gulf was swamp, mosquitoes, alligators and hillbillies.) That meant a pretty simple back and forth from the shore if there was a work-related commute involved. Not sure if it was the first place I checked out, the second, or possibly the third, but it was only a matter of hours on foot, and by the mid-afternoon I found a suitable accommodation: a ranch house in a quiet, residential, tropical rainforest-like, south Florida neighborhood filled with neat, semi-permanent trailer homes and similarly designed one-story ranches in the warm, deep shade of the clustered palms just off Andrews Avenue, which was one of the main commercial drags that ran north and south parallel to the coast but inland. From there, it would only be about a twenty-minute city bus ride to or from Las Olas Boulevard and the strip. The place was up two narrow local roads off Andrews, within close walking distance of two or three mini-strip malls with all the vital conveniences: bars, gas stations, and 24-hour quick-stops. It seemed respectable enough for a start—not at all bad, actually, fifty a week—so I signed the bottom line and handed over a week's rent up front

and a week's on deposit—fifty twice on the head—all of which included a walk-in closet-size, compact but immaculate, dark-paneled room in the back of the house, with new furniture of decent quality, a bath and a private entrance, maid service once a week, a/c, a new color TV and utilities. The old dude, the property owner, a certain Mr. J. M. Miley, USMM, Ret., not sure of the rank but definitely an officer and definitely a veteran of the big one, "WW II," as they call it, as soon as he heard the word "navy" come out of my mouth, in reference to me and my recent past? I was in. That was all. That and the C-note he needed forked over. Done. So, indoors with my overnight bag of new clothes, a toothbrush, and determination, still day two, the former swabbie made his way.

Now, for a word or two about Mr. J.M. Miley, the grandpa' of this part of the tail, who, though still robust, did not appear to be the healthiest specimen to ever hit his eighth decade. The retired merchant marine was somewhat stricken with this or that: a touch of the shakes; balding; damn near all the gray-white gone; crotchety walking; hunched a bit forward; and not a small man either, still almost six feet and probably around two hundred pounds. Though he was somewhat withered with age, he was still a lumbering presence, with bushy white eyebrows, pale skin, blue veins, and bag eyes; old man jowls; and a kind of quivering in his lower lip as he spoke, revealing the deep, dark tar stains on this lower set. But his spirits were usually high, which for him meant being naturally grizzled, open to friendship but definitely not seeking it, tough-minded, sometimes curt, but always certain. But for sure, J.M. smoked his own hand-rolled cigarettes. I recognized the yellow-packaged *Top* tobacco pouches and papers on the kitchen table from my times in the can. Same stuff po' folk smoked. Though he may have cut corners on his pleasures, he unsparingly catered to his two much-loved, equally crotchety, scurrying, and yelping, sometimes snarling, ancient Dachshunds that were basically in the same shape he was. And speaking of family ties, the old guy—I'm not sure if he was a widower or a lifelong bachelor because I never asked and he never mentioned it. His observable family members were the pair of mother and daughter *hundts* who seemed to be about the same age, both old, decrepit, teeth missing and withered. They may have only been separated by a year or two, so it stands to reason that, now well into their second decade, they would be such unpleasant and

unattractive pets that only a long-term master could love them. After a while, once I settled in, the old guy would occasionally invite me in for a shot or two of some good *ol' suthin' bo' whiskey* like *Ol' Grandad's* or maybe a *Yankee-style Seagram's Seven*, so there was also that in the bargain, a moment or two of human companionship, which was fine. Once he had me as an audience and after the *hundts* settled down a bit from their latest canine drama, sudden fits of yelping and scampering, chasing something, maybe each other, while momentarily losing their footing on the smooth linoleum, he'd begin recounting for me, what else? The seldom-told tales of his life at sea, including some of the times of war at sea, had me seated comfortably at his kitchen table and dragging cautiously on one of these quite strong, unfiltered, self-rolled, burning monstrosities, sitting back to exhale, and slowly taking in his adventure along with a taste of his whisky. Then, with only slightly exaggerated interest, I'd occasionally add a "wow!" and a "really?" Or ask for clarification here and there during one of his impromptu but routine, unscripted yet foundationally sound monologues, which, in general, made him easy to listen to. J. M. Miley, that old man, was the real deal, with a natural air of confident command. Whatever his rank, he was certainly up there on the bridge back then. And today? Still giving orders, but only to his tail-wagging shipmates and, for a while, to me, or at least trying to, the former sailor man tenant in the back.

In any event, his stories were definitely a lot cooler than mine, of that there was no doubt; massive cargo ships engulfed in flame at sea, rescues under enemy fire, enforcing the embargo of Japan, Pearl Harbor, etc., so I couldn't help but be at least reasonably attentive, even though other thoughts were constantly, stubbornly intruding, current and more urgent needs: there were ladies out there, close by too, the clock was always running and the game was always on. Besides, my *life at sea* fantasies had reached their climactic pivot point when the boat captain brought some piercing reality to them by asking about "*that Mickey Mouse sailor's cap*" just a few short months earlier. I'd moved on, gotten it out of my system; no more "*call me Ishmael*" fantasies after being released with my active-duty pay and the DD-214, then retiring as a grateful (to be honorably discharged instead of in the brig) former crew member of the MC Fox. But it felt good to give him the opportunity to tell his tales. That's what old men need anyway: to be

listened to, heard and appreciated for the lives they lived, the experiences they can share, the perspective they bring on the challenges and obstacles they faced, overcame, were crushed by, crippled by, detoured around, slid through, or otherwise vanished into the miasma of the long-forgotten past; the choices they made, the consequences they brought, how they were met, and what the results were, *i.e.*, the detailed map of how we got to where we are. At that moment, in his dining space, smoking his cigarettes, drinking his whisky, renting his backyard studio and listening to his tales, the long ago events of little discernible present consequence, but nonetheless here-so-noted, I was listening to, hearing, and recording them, rendering them permanent in some way, as of now, not lost forever in the endless and impenetrable thick mists of the entirely forgotten.

My twenty-first birthday was looming, and in the heady chaos of the last few days and nights in Long Beach, I almost forgot about it. My sudden landing on the run in Lauderdale wasn't going exactly as planned either; no car, no clothes, no rifle, so it's not clear exactly when, but likely only a day or two or three after checking in to J.M.'s, I headed out by bus to *Horseheads* address, the one his sister gave me, somewhere west of 95, trailer-park territory, where after knocking on the door unannounced, taking him by surprise, I found him, well, not terribly delighted to see me. To think of it, there's no memory of a call first; of course not, unless she let him know, because she never gave me the number, so a sudden guest appearance from a past he was trying to get away from, well, it kinda' figured. When he opened the door, though, he went quickly to how his uncle, whose home he was staying at and whose door I just knocked on, didn't care very much for my people ("the Jews," horns and tails), so that timely divulsion made it clear right away that I was down there on my own. He didn't even invite me in or offer to step out and join me for a beer. Thanks, *Horse*. Disappointed, yes, again, so there was no camaraderie available, and I would have been comforted by a long-time friend, like I still considered him, still reeling from the sudden loss, but there was none left, friendship-wise, it seemed, until later, of course, when he needed me. I'll get to that when it fits, but in the meantime, here in the Sunshine State, it didn't slow me down even a half-beat. I was hurt again, but it was sink or swim time, so the next item on the agenda was to get busy finding work and friendships on my own.

Before work, though? Comes *play*. Everybody knows that, especially having just turned twenty-one. Ma' didn't forget either, and since she had my new address, she sent me a birthday present: a Bulova Caravelle watch. I was not big into watches then, but still, the thought was appreciated. It was beautiful, low-key, with a brass finish; elegant, y'might say; and masculine but not showy, just like the birthday boy; and most importantly of all, it was cognizant of time. Speaking of which, playtime meant about the same thing in Florida as it did in New York: the 24-Hour Game, my favorite game of all. You remember the one where you try to bed the lady down within twenty-four hours of first setting eyes on her? That's when the clock starts, first eye contact. And I wasn't too bad at it either, especially not then and there with practically no constraints, a stranger in a strange land, able to move forward at an unobstructed rate right from the start. Winners never quit. Quitters never win. Losers play the blame game. On or about that hallowed twenty-first year's date, the Sunshine State newcomer was meandering about up on Andrews Boulevard, the NE corner, down by the local *Li'l General* quick mart shop behind the gas station, and adjacent to a small, neighborhood bar room. That was indeed the neighborhood place to see and be seen, especially since I had not yet attained wheels, so everything was either a hoof from J. M.'s or the city bus. This particular afternoon's meander brought me face to face with a very, very attractive specimen of the female persuasion a few short years my senior, wearing only sandals and a one-piece, terry cloth, light blue pair of hot-pants merged with a top that either outlined or actually displayed her entire form, every curve, angle, and dimension, supporting a very pretty, *Valley of the Dolls* type of Russ Meyers actress face. And she was crazy as a loon, a wayward vixen. Like medicated but unmedicated, like AWOL from somewhere where they lock the doors and keep the Thorazine handy, but at the same time unassuming, big-eyed and gentle, quiet and quite willing. In a word, *perfect*. Just my speed.

Well, this memorable score took a lot less than twenty-four hours. On sight, it was pretty much a done deal. I introduced myself, she did the same, next came the invitation, and the rest is history. I honestly thought Susan (yes, yet another in a long list of Susans), was a birthday gift from *The Great Provider Above*, because aside from her way too firm boob-implants, she

was a dream come true. A wow. An *all night longer*, an *again'n'again'r* she was, she was. At some point during a lull in the proceedings, between bouts of abandon, I left to look for work, an interview, or I had already found some and it was time to show up, or to grab another gallon of milk and Oreo run to the Li'l General, but I left her in one of the two twin beds in my cozy little love nest, sleeping soundly while on the errand, whatever it happened to be. Next thing you know, I'm back, and she's gone. You couldn't enter or exit the studio without passing by his back kitchen door, which meant if he was in there futzing around with the two *hundts* or even just having a smoke, he'd see everything and everyone coming and going, so he musta' seen her, 'cause old J. M. Miley was sure there when I got back, waiting at his back door, and he was fuming. seriously enraged—not out-of-control, but not holding back either. Captain's Mass again, on land and for real. Inexplicably, it seemed, he was actually serious when listing, as one of his few standing orders, "Now here this: no lady guests," which I agreed to in the same way I agreed to buy car insurance, not drink and drive, or smoke weed. Yeah, I heard him say it, and I paid the requisite lip service to it, but never for a moment did I consider it anything more than some *pro forma* rhetorical blather that he felt compelled to broadcast as a local, upstanding citizen. But honestly, realistically, how could he have expected a single, healthy, and very active twenty-one-year-old in 1979 to keep it in his pants, or a guy renting a room like his to spend additional for a motel three or four times a week, or once or twice a month, whatever he could grab? But, but, his enraged expression and the restrained clarity with which he chose and spoke his minimalist, economically efficient words ("you will be out") suggested that he was serious, quite serious, which meant either move out or step up my game. In Florida, a landlord doesn't need a court order to evict a tenant; a word backed up by a shotgun will suffice. And I wasn't ready to move out, so "Sorry about that, J.M., got you now, not again, sir!" over and out. Right. Sure, but of course, what else could I say? Let's take a vote. Check with the real-estate attorneys? He was a local captain, and I was still barely even in south Florida as a Sears and Roebuck sailor in civvies for five minutes, so in that regard, my place was clear. I had to suck it up and practice discretion or just move out. So, I chose the former.

The work front was moving along as well, day-job to day-job, a stint with an office supply company on the boulevard, doing their deliveries, mostly cartons; not much furniture, aside from maybe an office chair or a filing cabinet here and there; but still, it was moving, driving, outdoors, gaining experience, and helping pay the rent. The tall, attractive, frosted-blond, mid-thirties wife of the dark-bearded and athletic owner took time every now and again to give me a quick wink and pinch in passing. It was cool, so I went along with it as long as she took any possible weight from her hubby, the boss, who was a pretty Florida, laid-back sort and focused more on the business's bottom line than his wife's, so, yeah, it was cool, and they let me use the company van to get back and forth the quarter mile or so from work, and J.M., who was impressed, even let me park it on his driveway, referring to them, the office supply company, as my *outfit*, "that outfit you work for." But there was a rub, a major one: the *outfit* gave me a little too much freedom, especially for a guy my age and lifestyle who craved the nightlife action of strip bars and boozing and cruising, y'see, and now that I had wheels at night and a gas credit line, I had wide access. That's spelled t-r-o-u-b-l-e. Somehow, during my steady nightly prowls using the *outfit* delivery van, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid's* strip bar and single-table poolroom made it onto my roster of regular rounds, and after a preliminary *getting-to-know-you* visit or two, the sawdust, dart board, and half-naked ladies stuck. No need to guess why. Besides being easy to get to—less than a twenty-minute drive—and adjacent to a far-side corner of the airport, yeah, right on the fence, the ladies were just so fine, so pretty, and also so very cool and happy in their work as the life of the party, the *sine qua non* of festivities and the center of everyone's attention. Playing pool in their negligees with you between sets, beating them, losing—it was all good, and no heavy hustle; just fun, flirting, a little squeeze here, a short brush there, and that's how business was done. Man, it was joy; even the pool, not minding buying them drinks, or volunteering tips at all. It's like, rather than playing the singles bar hit-or-miss game and mostly missing at that, it was more like being halfway there as soon as you entered. The trouble begins, though, when you start believing that you are "in love" with one of them. That's when fantasy starts skidding abruptly off track before hitting the unyielding wall of reality. She was a brunette, of course, *Mary Ann* from *Gilligan's Island* in a negligee and less, dancing for you from barely two or

three feet away. Up on stage the negligee comes off. *Au naturel*, she smiles, winks, bumps and grinds to the beat of Led Zeppelin's "All of My Love," and maybe even takes your hand in hers, guiding you to caress her thigh, belly and hips, close enough to feel her breathe on you. She's loving it; we both are; everyone is. But it's the tipping, slipping the folded bills behind her garters or stockings, bikini top or G-string strap, anywhere (*I love you, see?*) that electric moment of even the briefest flesh-to-flesh contact, that's what knocks you completely off your bearings; that moment when you look into her eyes as you touch; *she's with you* (the eyes that lie), *she wants you*, that's what you see, and so you drop like a smooth, heavy stone into the soft wet mud. *She wants me*. Trouble.

One job wasn't enough, not even a full-timer. There was still too much free time. With two jobs a week—a steady one along with a part-time one—and only \$50 per week in rent plus food as overhead, sometimes eating for free at one of the part-time restaurant gigs, I was soon able to save up enough to buy a new gold chain. I threw a week or two's worth of paychecks at it and headed out to Cassidy's in the outfit's van for the next most urgent item on the agenda: that tall, curvy brunette, or that jiggling little Latina? Maybe the skinny blonde with that wicked smile? All the while, of course, no matter what else, on or off the agenda, the game continued. Showing up at the bar, this particular night, by that time as a regular, my seat was waiting, and the happy greetings were flowing. So, nice. I mean, even if these girls are half-fakin' it, it's their work, I get that, but they fake it so well it hardly matters. Come on, most of life is a presentation anyway, so really, who cares? Hey, was I Mr. Sincerity? Was Mary Ann really a castaway? Not exactly. In fact, my shtick wasn't very different from theirs: make the girls believe I was overcome by lust for them, no matter how unlikely, but exclusively them; it has to be you; no substitutes; insanely, desperately, so they'd be flattered into giving in to me. It was a pretty decent ploy and one I could actually sell, expanding on the grain of truth, but rarely was it actually true, so who was I to judge the dancing strippers? Those other ladies, the real ones I had the real thing for, were much more difficult to persuade; they were the higher-hanging fruit, but I went for them all: high, low and in between. What I got, I got. What I didn't get, I kept working on. Quitters never win. That's how you play it. At Butch Cassidy's my aim was no different than usual: to bed down

and enjoy one of these sexy bitches as fast as I could make it happen. Although many a 24 hour frame had already passed, it'd been weeks, I finally set my determined sights on my favorite, and steadiest target, with whom I'd already invested substantially, Mary Ann from Gilligan's Island, the blue-eyed brunette with the alabaster skin who smelled like deep sin, focusing fully on her to ply my most practiced trade. With her, that grain of truth didn't need much expanding; she had me. Oozing with charm and deep need, I gave her all I had—drink after drink, dance after dance, tip after tip, eight ball after eight ball—'til late in the night, just before closing, zero hour, do-or-die time. It was pretty strict down there in those days, with a "last call" at about one thirty in the morning, and at two o'clock the doors were shut with you on the outside. Some clubs even go so far as to hire armed, off-duty, uniformed cops to back up the bouncers, so you get the message: there's no bargaining for overtime; you just leave. These good ol' boys stand for law and order, and no short-legged damn Yankee was gonna give'm no guff. I got that too. Hallelujah. There probably are some after-hours clubs, but none that I knew of (a stranger in a strange land), meaning that after the doors closed I was on my own, and that's when the loneliness set in. Now comes the dreaded "last call," and I'm feeling desperate. She's giving me/; all the attention I ever wanted in public. Great, the eyes, the touches, the glances, but I'm not sealing the deal here, and I'm hungry, very hungry, starving. I'm starving for her. I want her after hours, all for me, back at J.M.'s, the whole package; I don't care what that old man says, so I reach for my newly purchased, hard-earned gold chain, unhook it from my neck, and tell her I want to give it to her as a token of my admiration. Yes, I was shitfaced. 100% totally shitfaced (how I drove like that remains a mystery). After only a moment or two's pause, she glances at me, eyes the chain, and says: "*I'll take it if you really want to give it to me, but I am not going to sleep with you.*" She may have said it twice just to be sure there was no misunderstanding later, but of course, what I heard was: "*If I take this, that means I know you are putting a claim on me, and I am accepting it. You may not get there tonight, but you're on the right track, Jack. So, keep it up.*" Nice? Right? "*Take the chain,*" I told her, "*it's okay.*" John Barleycorn meets Carl Jung, joining my fun house staff of interpreters and taking over the voice. Then she took the chain.

The next morning, I awoke in the van, parked in some downtown alley not far from the *outfit*, and it was way after *nine*, closer to *eleven*, and I hadn't even been home. Musta' driven the van there solo after leaving the bar in a *blackout* and got as close as I could manage before parking to avoid crashing, now coming to in the empty back bay, immensely hung-over, the bright Florida sunshine killing my bleary-eyes, (much worse than that first morning), headache, dry-sick mouth, late for work and missing a newly purchased, hard-earned 14k gold chain. Nice. It gets nicer. *What the fuck did I do? You gave her your chain. She told you she wasn't gonna fuck you, but you gave it to her anyway. Keep drinking and going to strip bars, asshole.* Heading right to the *outfit* was all I could think to do at that point. They might have already notified the local PD, and of course, they fired me as soon as I showed up. *Bye. We'll mail you your last check, or you can come by on payday; just leave the keys where they belong and keep walking.* Nice. No more winks, smiles, or pinches. No more nighttime joy rides. But I understood. It was too much for me, the freedom to roam and the responsibility of another's property. I had trouble telling myself *no*, so it was down again but not out. There were a lot of mom-and-pop businesses in Fort Lauderdale, including companies with actual trucks to drive and bars to work or booze at, that might appreciate me beyond the level of a night-time busboy delivering legal pads and paper clips during the day. It was time to step up and promote myself; there was no one around that was likely to do it for me, meaning ain't nothing to wait for. So, I licked my wounds, forgave myself for my weakness, but did not forget about the hard-earned, now lost forever, second gold chain, miraculously internalizing the message that at twenty-one, with no one to answer to, hanging out in strip bars, me, booze, near-naked broads and a pocket full of hard-earned money are a combustible and worrisome congregation to be tightly regulated, carefully monitored, or totally avoided. And so, like they sang, "*keep on truckin'*," and on that hopeful note, kept on trucking.

Sterling Pope

Next up on the wide, wide world of work agenda was another Lauderdale-based home-hospital equipment supply and delivery "outfit" similar to one in

Long Beach, the chemist's pal, where I worked for a few months. Long Beach Surgical is something less than a glowing memory and not much worth discussing except to say that, aside from getting the new-guy guff from the regular all-male employees there, which at times got ugly, the few months working there were a net gain experience-wise. There was the time I rode shotgun for Chris, one of the local west-end boy drivers in his early twenties, another, beefy, light complexioned hockey-playing slugger, not really a bad dude for a bigoted, blithering ignoramus, who, while enduring the frustration of searching for a street address on a house set for delivery in the *canals*, a Long Beach area with a notable number of Jewish families, cried out: "*Fuckin' Jews are too rich to have numbers.*" Yup. He nailed it. After swindling the gullible, trusting, childlike, and innocent gentiles out of their money, the next thing we do is rid ourselves of those unsightly house numbers on our front doors. We do this just to frustrate gentile delivery men like him, and true to our crafty ways, it works like a charm. That's us. That's how we roll. Always scheming. Okay, it was funny, and he didn't realize I was a member of that cursed tribe, so after that, I made it a point from then on to make sure right away all my co-workers and associates knew that *I'm a Hebe! Like it or not, that's what I am.* Yes, Chris, the otherwise decent fellow, was blissfully unaware of my tail and horns until I subtly managed to bring him up to speed, maybe at some point by mentioning my cousin's bar mitzvah or my passion for bagels and lox. Anyway, back to Lauderdale, since I'd handled that equipment before—the heavy, motorized, iron-framed electric beds, oxygen tanks, packaged material, etc.—they hired me right away. This outfit owned a real truck, a four-speed, maybe five, a stick on the floor, no power steering or brakes, just a foot brake, a clutch and a gas pedal—all the fancy footwork devices requiring synchronized timing, the give and take, and to what degree pressure needed to be applied to which and when. It was probably an International S-series, 16 or 1700, whose height was your standard—just under eleven feet of clearance. I didn't know the weight, but it was several classes up from a converted passenger to cargo van, meaning you needed a commercial driver's license to get behind her wheel, and the best part was that they already had a full-time guy who could coach me through whatever needed to be taught. The job was his helper, his shotgun, delivering and putting together the beds and setting up the tanks, and then doing the reverse when the time came. It was

expensive and heavy cargo, but two men trained for the work and familiar with the equipment and how to get around Broward County could well handle it, so it would be relatively easy, and again, most importantly, it was outdoors and on the road. To make it work, I just needed to follow instructions: get there on time, and don't steal or crack up the truck. Stuff like that. Again, simple.

Sterling Pope has to be one of the all-time coolest names known to modern Western men, second only to *Sharp James*, the all-time coolest. Them African American folk sure got some style, like *sterling*, a type of purity and a fine example of, and *Pope*, authority, dignity, and gentility, descended from Caesar. Can't beat that, except for the former and maybe *Curtis Mayfield*. Anyway, Mr. Pope, he drove that truck. He wore that truck, and somehow it fit him, and he it. They were a pair, like the pipe smokin' gentleman Jimmy D and his *mighty, little red truck that could*—a man and his truck, a man and his six-guns, his dogs, his whiskey and his women. When they fit, it's easy to see. You know it as soon as you see it. We hit it off pretty well right away too, since the first time, after a brief introduction the day before, we did a full day's run as a team. He saw I was there to work—one run in the morning, then an hour's lunch somewhere on the road, and a second run in the afternoon—picking up, delivering, assembling, disassembling, loading, driving, and keeping going. Splitting tips the whole time, trying not to engage the suffering too much, the subdued sorrow, borderline despair in the gloom—these were mostly patients released by the hospital to go home for the final curtain. One week you'd deliver and install it, and a few days or maybe a couple of weeks later you'd be back for the reverse. Sometimes these were young patients, much tougher to detach from, but you still had to try, always having to deal with the double-edged blade of empathy. You love and you cry, pleasure and pain. He was about a decade and a half older, a married guy, a father of three, a provider, balding, athletic, and black (of course, what white man could ever think of a name that cool, so naturally and matter-of-factly cool?) At lunch, he jokes, "*Pope, Sterling Pope here, delivering compressed oxygen by the tank to your door with professionalism and compassion, just lie back and breathe. It's all handled and it's all clear.*" Then, with a hint of a fast wink and an understatedly graceful nod, he took a sip from the tall, full,

frosted, thick, and sweating mug of the Champagne of Bottled Beers, swallowed a mouthful of suds, and then, with his free hand, tightened his trusty tool belt a notch, celebrating yet another job well done.

My co-worker had a big interest in me learning to drive a stick. He needed an able co-pilot, not just a *shotgun* or a hand with the cargo, someone else behind the wheel when he wanted a break, and because that was all we used, that one solid, iron, steel, aluminum, chrome, and glass beast on wheels, and that was how we rolled, literally, the core function of the business, the five-speed, maybe a double-rear axle, but definitely a heavy animal with a hydraulic tailgate, this was the one to get started on. It was both a satisfying little toy truck to play around in and, at the same time, big enough to learn something useful with, and Mr. Pope, the hopeful teacher, and I, the eager student, having a common goal, went at it. After a quick fifteen or twenty minute lunch, for which we were entitled to a full paid hour, we'd finish our meal, usually a Pizza Hut or an outdoor fat deli sandwich feast, and head to the closest, biggest, and emptiest parking or construction lot. There, we'd switch places, and I'd jump in behind the wheel for the next lesson. Ready, Freddy. Let us roll. The man had a world of patience; it's not an easy thing to get right away. You get the concept pretty quickly; it's actually pretty simple, simple enough to be outlined on the knob at the top of the stick: four or five shorter (depending on the number of speeds) intersecting lines along a horizontal, the neutral position, four up for each of the four gears, and one all the way to the left and down for reverse, in a kind of *H* and a half shape. It's diagrammatically clear, but each machine is different. Each beast is ever so slightly its own model, so you have to develop the feel for yours by driving it, sputtering, choking, bucking, and stalling, then re-igniting, idling in neutral, then plunging down the clutch, shifting the stick, and giving it just the right amount of fuel as you slowly let up on the clutch, ready to brake but not riding it, again and again. Slower is often better, and sooner rather than later, you eventually get it. Not *ready for traffic* get it; not *ready for 95* get it; but *ready for more practice* get it. And tomorrow was another lesson, another journey into the asphalt and tar wilds of the southeast Sunshine State, and another step away from the park bench.

Next up, Auntie Mame's

It was the newest trend in the dining entertainment world, theme restaurant venues, like *Hard Rock Café* for the make-believe rebel pop-music crowd, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* for the make-believe edgy crowd, and a few others not worth recalling, but this one in Broward County was going for a more family-oriented market, so they chose a family theme that everyone could enjoy together, Mom, Dad, and the kids, even Grandma' and Grandpa', uncles, aunts, and cousins, from the legendary though mostly forgotten *Auntie Mame* of Broadway fame, the musical. A grand opening extravaganza was scheduled in the next couple of short weeks, and they needed to be fully staffed for that pivotal event and staffed well, meaning with energetic, friendly, and attractive young people that could play their roles as waitresses, bartenders, busboys, or hosts. They even had real talent as live entertainment, including professional singers and dancers, and they hired me as one of the team of five or six steady part-time hosts, a step up from *busboy* and two up from *dishwasher*. And it was gonna be fun! Almost exactly what I had in mind for going down there, and certainly a move in the right direction. And as for booze and broads, they came with the territory, and because it was kinda' like a nightclub (it was only open at night), that was that, and clubs being what they are (where I too often got tripped up), this time was no exception, but not before having a lotta' fun. I'll get to both.

Comfortably nested back at J.M.'s, and after having exhausted the current supply of local talent for the 24-Hour Game in the walkable range between the house and the Li'l General parking lot, it was surely time, as I was putting down some roots, albeit unsteady and uncertain ones, to get my hands on some wheels. At this point, I was usually working two or three jobs at a time: a full-timer (the hospital supply *outfit*, and they weren't offering to let me take the International home) and one or two part-timers. The rent was being handled, food was plentiful, and after taking a pass on buying another gold chain for the moment (one less thing to worry about giving a sweet-talkin', curvy stripper with that mirage of a look in her eye), there was now money enough for a down payment on an older set of decent-looking, respectable, still reliable wheels. Up the block and across

the way, on a corner alongside the railroad tracks and a block or two closer than the Li'l General, was a service station I'd walk or drive past on my way to or from work. Naturally, an occasional wave or nod would beget another and, eventually, a "howdy" and then a "hey," and, sometime after that, a few minutes of small talk. I'd gas up there when I had the option, so the owner, his foreman, and the big-ass, not-so-friendly German Shepherd watchdog and I became acquainted.

One of them—I'm not sure which one—might have been the pooch, or it may have been the boss, and the owner was named *Blaze*. The name could have easily fit either one. The human, though, was a real character: a guy in his early to middle forties, a local, homegrown gas station service center entrepreneur who wore a black eye patch to cover the left empty socket. He didn't play it up at all, and I never asked, but it was *badass*. No one ever mentioned it, so the quieter everyone around him was about it, the more *badass* it seemed. Let it go; just leave it a mystery. Maybe it got put out by a broken beer bottle in a bar fight, and he killed the guy for it, served his time, and then went straight again, possibly a souvenir from a combat unit in Indochina, now Joe Citizen, whatever, pumping gas, overhauling engines, fixing flats, selling a customer or two's old car for them every now and again right off his well-placed corner lot, and he wears it well, the black patch, just above the daily stubble and just below the solid hairline of black to silver-gray, so probably he was the true and only *Blaze*.

The canine contender? Well, he had his own look too, like *Rin Tin Tin* but not cute; more wolf-like and potentially ferocious, similar to *Jake* in Long Beach. It's not that he snarled or barked too often; he seldom did, but when he did, it drew everyone's attention, including his master's, who with just a simple, quick glance, not even a word, would freeze him in motion, shutting him right down, and he never wagged his tail or greeted you either. You could see him checking you out though, even before walking onto the property, but there was no further acknowledgement. You were either a target or you were nothing at all; you were barely even there, and that was all there was to it. That, his size and the aura of potential danger, damage, and blood he radiated. Blood. Yours. *Blaze*, the dog, was never chained, so he had full range to roam, but he never left the station property and never

bothered anyone either; nonetheless, he was always a somewhat menacing presence, just like the human Blaze was. Put it this way: a stickup man would have to first shoot the pooch dead or, in the case of law enforcement, feed him a drugged slice of steak before advancing on the property with motives either Blaze was unsure of. One night, back in New York, I hopped a backyard fence into Henry's patch of garden apartment dirt between the boardwalk and the road. It was late, and for some reason, I was in a hurry, so as a shortcut, I made a quick leap into his yard, not knowing that Jake was resting there while still keeping watch, unchained. As soon as I landed, I turned around and saw the beast, who had now sprung quickly to attention, ears up. He knew me; he saw me around as I saw him; he knew I was Henry's friend, but like Blaze, he never greeted me or wagged his tail either, so when confronted so suddenly like that, both startled, I hit the alarm immediately by instinctively calling out "Jake!" which must have sounded to him in tone like a command. That seemed to freeze him. He didn't react any further; maybe he felt it as a sort of salute, a gesture of respect, if not submission. Wasting no time, I turned around and made quick like a bunny, hopping right the fuck back over the property perimeter and out of canine range. My encounter with Blaze in Broward County, however, was a lot less elegant.

On the corner point of the corner station was a cool-looking, kinda' retro, early-sixties-era, not-bad-shape Chrysler Newport Custom positioned for sale. It was an off-white, eggshell-colored two-door with no rust or body damage, not a dent, a decent enough AM/FM and decent enough paint, a clean interior, no tears, and it ran great, quiet and smooth, which Blaze, the human, was looking for \$300 for. He said he would guarantee it mechanically for a reasonable spell and would take a down payment of one hundred and a gentleman's agreement to pay off the balance in fifty-dollar monthly increments, something like that, and again, I agreed to the numbers but negotiated into the bargain that he'd let me keep the plates and registration, etc., as they were, however he worked it, meaning I wasn't going to have to bother with all that time- and money-wasting bureaucratic hassle. I just needed the keys, the gas, and the okay. As soon as all three lined up, it was off to the games again, only now they were mobile games,

auto-mobile mobile, meaning access to a much wider field with many, many more available quarries out there.

Tactics and strategies

Making ice-breaking eye contact through car windows while driving was a fun and easy way to get started, and I found, you know, a near constant stream of opportunities. Like at a warm and bright afternoon red light, you glance over once, hold the look for a beat or two, then casually turn back away. Maybe she notices, maybe she doesn't, but she's young—in her twenties—and cute enough. You count another two or three beats, your FM sounding good from decent speakers, just in the background now, Led Zeppelin, *Fool in the Rain*, that lazy rhythm, then look again, a little more casually, slower the second time, and hold it, and a half-beat after she meets your gaze? Smile. A friendly "How you doin'?" smile. If she smiles back, go for it. If not? Let it go and seek another. There's an endless supply. That's it. The light is now green, and you're both mobile and easy to follow for a few more lights, making it easy to meet up in the mall parking lot, where she was headed to the army and navy surplus store, and wouldn't you know it? So was I! Somewhere between the gas masks and parachutes, we decided that the next stop, after shopping, of course, was going to be back at my place, which meant sneaking her in behind grizzled and gnarly, lady-hatin' J.M.'s back. No matter, we'll get there; it has to be done, and y'know what else? We sure did. You see, speed was a big part of this game. The faster you could get from barely up at bat to safely sliding into home plate, the better; the clock was running, monitored, and timed from initial eye contact on, so not much haste but also no waste, *festina lente*, as they say on Alligator Alley, just the right combinations of throttle, clutch, and brake as we moved forward. As soon as we landed on one of the two twin fold-out beds that served as sofas by day, well, there was not enough time in my book for even full disrobing. Partition was enough. In fact, while we were kissin' it up and pulling at each other chromosomally, the only two critical textile obstacles were being pulled aside so that the body parts that needed fitting together were unobstructed and quickly fitted

together. Wow... What urgency! Two love trains colliding at full speed head on, both ways: comin' at each other, bringin' it on, takin' it in, and giving it right back. Aside from Susan, I think that generic, cute, but chunky, fast-chick in her slow Toyota or something was one of my all-time fastest, probably within an hour of the voice commanding *go!* And it was also a memorable one, both illustrative of how to play the game well when the opportunity is discovered and of how nearly inconceivable it would have been without my trusty, slowly-being-paid for Chrysler Newport Custom, which Grandpa' J.M. also graciously allowed me to park in his driveway, a welcome perq. Little did he know it was my *Search and Sin-mobile*.

With all of that, I became a semi-regular at the gas station, another local social hub to see and be seen at, either filling up, making a payment, or just stopping in for a quick shmooze about anything topical, and the canine Blaze began to warm up to me. It was probably many weeks in coming, but finally he'd approach me, and I thought I could detect a slight bow to his head and wag in the tail as he came along and sniffed my hand while I patted and stroked the top of his head. These encounters were pleasant but brief, as he wasn't the focus of my action there anyway, nor I his. The fearsome watchdog pooch was just part of situational management, and that was fine. Cuddly, he was not. Handsome, yes, but cuddly? Nyet. The time I'm getting to is the time I took the apparent friendliness a step too far. He was getting so relaxed around me that I thought it would be okay to bend down and get my face close to his so I could speak his name a little more quietly instead of having to project from above. Mistake. As soon as I got down there, inches from his head, he opened his big jaws wide and whacked me—not biting me—slamming his head sideways with his wide open jaw, nailing me with his upper and lower teeth, and scraping some of the top layer of skin on my face, mainly the forehead and chin. He didn't break any skin or draw blood, but the sharp and hard fangs definitely made his point—a warning. *He didn't care for it. He'd prefer I didn't. Don't do it again. If you do, you'll lose your face.* Got it. So with that, I was put on notice. Okay, maybe we're not really friends. Got that too. But he could have just as easily snapped my face off; it was that quick, focused, and fierce. Naturally, I was grateful to still have my face largely intact, but, needless to say, I no longer felt warm and cuddly towards the beast. That

expiration date was swift and sure. Thanks, Blaze. *Man's best friend*, my desperado ass. I recovered, didn't overreact, the gas station boys took note, everyone shook it off, and we all got the message: okay, then, that's how it is; then *fuck you too*, pooch.

Meanwhile, back at Auntie Mame's, after the big first night's eruption of frenetic activity and the awkwardness involved in the near constant problem solving on the fly common to all new enterprises, the first night out of a very public, brand-new business with klieg lights but no velvet ropes, close enough to glamor Broward County-style, variables eventually fell into place, patterns began to take shape, an order appeared, and a routine set in. My job was to be one of the two regular male front door hosts, wearing pressed white shirts and black slacks, dress black shoes, burgundy colored satin vests, and black bow ties, greeting the guests and escorting them to seats, the front rows of which were reserved, the open main floor and the upper balconies. It was a huge place, with probably seating for three hundred people, maybe more when the house was full, which was every night of the three or four a week it was open. It was a mob, an ordered, good-time havin' family mob. The actual security was handled by one or two Broward County off-duty deputy sheriffs, armed and in uniform, moonlighting out of the way, just out of direct view across from us in the parking lot, where they were stationed in plain sight and could keep a watchful eye on the door and us, so there was peace, and they kept it. We just had to have a good time, serve the guests, and not make life too difficult for anybody. And I tried. I really, really tried.

Typically, I'd drive right over to J.M.'s after the day shift delivering oxygen tanks and setting up hospital beds with Mr. Pope, take a quick shower and change into my host's duds before heading back out to Mame's and availing myself of the free hamburger, Coke and fries meal they provided the night's staff upon arrival. Everybody ate, including dishwashers, busboys, bartenders, and floor managers. As I said, it was a big enough operation to carry that cost, physically and spatially, like the size of a college gymnasium with ceilings just as high and an always-full house, so they were rakin' it in. I never saw the books, but it looked like it was plenty solvent based on the crowd size and orders every night, three or four a week, plus two matinees

on the weekends. By about 6:30–7 p.m., we were up and ready on our posts, ready for the doors to open and the crowded action already assembling just outside to begin filing in. There was a wave of interest at the beginning, and it attracted families, couples, and even groups of young singles from all over the area, down to Dade and north to Belle Glade, maybe further, as a novelty dinner theater that was informal and fun. Yes, there was a show, an extravaganza display of hokey patriotism and good-time spirit, the spirit of the show's namesake, "*Life is a banquet, and most poor suckers are starving to death*" (whatever that means), and I dug it in all its cheesy charisma, but I never signed on to perform anything: nothing, no magic tricks or arias, no impersonations, tap-dancing, or stand-up, just host, eat burgers, and get paid. That bug hadn't yet bit me, so that's it, final, despite their occasional urgings. Oh, and yeah, and not to be left out, the gig included two free drinks each for staff after the doors were shut at 2 a.m. sharp as an incentive to complete the shift, help break down the floor, unwind before going home, and so strengthen the social bonds that made for a successful working team. Two drinks, that's it. You couldn't even pay for a third. Ironically, that was just enough to light the fuse.

The night of the mythical "LPN"s

A short time after beginning, it became clear that my co-workers, the folks doin' the jobs that involve direct interaction with the public' were show-business types. The ad I responded to may have even mentioned it, but it never really registered because they didn't connect with me, nightclub work and or showbiz. Of course, there's naiveté. I now know they are deeply connected. The picture started to become clear after only a week or two of shifts, and when there were occasions to take breaks and for me to take a long, slow look at how extraordinarily attractive the girls were, like jaw-dropping even up close, and my co-host, the guy they bookended me up with at the front door, we might as well have been twins, the same height, age, and coloring, only he was also, obviously, a professional or at least semi-professional competitive body-builder, which, of course, is a form of showbiz. I was just trying to hustle a few regular, legal bucks and not suffer too much humiliation, boredom, or abuse in the process, but I could see that

for him it was clearly show business, a performance; he became a character, a friendly, compact Florida muscle man whose upper arms, biceps, and triceps together were bigger than his neck was wide; picture Barney Rubble on steroids. It was funny, though, and it worked; he was strong but disarming. His smile and friendly approach to the guests made him more endearing than threatening. Now I needed my own trademark shtick, for which I was gonna have to start with my default setting: a young guy from the big city, New York, fast, easy, sharp, and fun and I wasn't about to commit my life to looking like a 5' 5", 200-pound, muscle-bound cartoon character like my partner did. In a fight, I could handle myself decently enough, even at only 140 welterweight pounds, so who cares? Anyone too big? I'd drive over him in a tank. Backward and forward, first, second, third, fourth, neutral, then reverse. Got it now, the hang of it. Rather, I was gonna be who and what I was and take it from there. That decision, like many others, had both positive and negative consequences, as well as a few ugly ones.

The good

That would begin with young, athletic, graceful and gorgeous Linda, but she was not the star of the show. That would be whoever was playing *Mame* on any particular night or performance, but she was definitely the climax, if you follow me. At the very end of every performance, of which I had no clear idea what preceded it as I was always just outside the door until about then, immediately after the show-stopping, crowd-rousing high-note finale belted out by the lead, a few surprise events commenced simultaneously, bringing about the euphoric triumph of the broader theme of the show: the unity of the Yankee *nawth an'* the honor of the Dixie south, both of which were symbolized by, you guessed it, Linda. On cue, just at the start of the musical's crescendo and finale, she'd rocket forward from somewhere within the deep shadows of the rear of the house on roller skates, adorned with blazing sparklers sizzling in her crown and torch, the *Lady of Liberty* herself. They did her up in green makeup, all of her: her face, hair, hands and robes, until she was a glowing, radiating spectacle on wheels, pirouetting and gliding in wide sweeps and tight circles, swirling and twirling

up and down the aisles and around the stage until finally ascending a ramp up onto the center of the stage itself, now circling the lead, when the entire cast began taking their bows, and the whole house was now on their feet, whoopin' n' stompin' an' hollerin' like a Fourth of July on New Year's Eve, uniting all Americans in a euphoric round of cheers and applause! And pretty Linda, with the legendary perfect nipples? It was her moment when she was all of that and more: a twenty-one-year-old, sandy-haired Sally Fields as Gidget built like a Barbie doll with a naughty secret. Off stage, she was a sweet, adorable, unpretentious, and talented performer with all the beauty, body, curves, eyes, smiles, the look, the moves, natural, earthy poise, and charm she needed to keep everyone that saw her mesmerized, which of course included me. And she never, ever flaunted it or took herself seriously beyond being a professional, a dedicated, on-time, likable performer and one of the team. "LPN" (as we men-folk discreetly referred to her) was just another underpaid, undiscovered star making the most of it—life in general and this opportunity in particular—no different than the rest of us in that sense, though with perhaps more modest talents and charms. In other words, she was damn near perfect; all that could be seen, felt, or heard suggested that the lady was way beyond whatever degree of perfection her nipples suggested. Consequently, we male members of the cast, and maybe some of the females too, were already sold and in line with everyone else in the audience, waiting patiently for her to emerge when possibly, hopefully, one night our tickets would be punched and she would be ours.

Simultaneous to Linda's graceful grand entrance, two male flag bearers, one each stationed at the rear of the house by the far ends of the two outer aisles, say east and west, and on that same beat as Linda's cue, began running up the fifty or so yards length of the aisle (back of the house to front) while waving their big flags on tall poles, one *Old Glory*, the other *Old Dixie*, then sprinting up the matching staircases to their respective balconies, whereupon landing turned back around to face the crowd while keeping the flags waving in fast and wide figure eights in time with the extravaganza's swelling musical conclusion, *Ta-DAAA!!!* That was exactly what I told them I had no interest in—none, zero—and that I wasn't there for that. *Thank you anyway*. But with Linda as irresistible bait in her sparkling

torch and glittering crown and her green Liberty Lady body-tight robe on wheels, at some point around the third or fourth week, after most of us had already been fit stably into our assigned grooves (aside from a few minor adjustments here and there I'll get to later), I just happened to be standing pretty close to the westerly flag bearer's position from where he'd be handed-off his long-poled prop to begin his sprint. I usually planted myself around there about a minute or two before the ignition of the extravaganza's foot-stompin' conclusion kicked-off just to witness LPN's perfect entrance, her bare upper thighs, and on upwards, from top to bottom, and back around again. It's vague, but it was probably at this point, with my eyes so fixed on her (maybe I'd get a return glance from her big, soft, deep brown, loving eyes), that I hadn't noticed that I had been manipulated into the exact position at the exact moment to have someone on staff thrust that *bigass* flag at me at the last possible split second, then pointed in the direction and ordered to *go! Sunsabitches! Damn rebels! LOL!* But there I was, swept in despite myself, hootin' an' hollerin' an' runnin' up the lane waving the flag in perfect sync with my mirrored opposite, up those Victorian-style stairs to the top landing, then turning around, still waving in fast figure eights, but now facing and smiling at the crowd and feeling like I'd been ready all my life to explode just like that, waiting for my chance to jump into the limelight and shine, however briefly. Who knew it would be so much fun? Not nervous at all; rather, it was exhilarating, especially without any actual preparation aside from casually watching that action several times a week, and even then, my focus was mainly on LPN, but they nailed me, and the show must go on, and so I went for it. The "universal flow" took over, meaning there was little to decide about; just continue to flow with what was already flowing, the stream of life taking me by surprise, and you know what else? Speaking of flow, there was a lot of derivative good that also seemed to flow from that unanticipated performance, so though I didn't want to do it again, at all (sorry, folks, still not my scene), I did do it once, and for that? I ain't sorry at all either.

Some bad

The bad often bleeds into the ugly, so it can be challenging to separate them, but I'll try. The differences are worth noting when there are actually

any. We shall see, so here it is. My free nights out, well, they weren't getting any tamer. In fact, now that I stabilized some, the shock of losing the Oldsmobile and all it meant receded, and as I grew more comfortable in my new habitat, with new dependable wheels and enough spending money to eat, drink, pay for gas, and rent at that clean, shady, cozy, little paneled, and air-conditioned den of iniquity, the ol' reckless Rob routine kicked back up in spades. That wasn't good news, and speaking of "good," the voice advised that I'd been *good long enough*.

For me, a newcomer to the south Florida scene and barely out of my teens, the spicy action was all downtown on the beach strip, which, to be frank, taken as a whole, was pretty much a disappointment. It looked way too developed and way too regulated to have a good time at. No, not that beach, way too narrow even with the tide out, way too exposed, and way, way, way too commercial, austere and contrived, as if it were laid out specifically for a promotional postcard snapshot and left that way, like a Hollywood film set creation of a jumpin', way too cool but not really at all, a made-for-TV commercial Sunshine State beach strip but not a real one. Up in Jacksonville with the good ship M.C. Fox, the time we did a weekend drill there, I discovered Jax Beach with its slow and easy motorcade of dune buggies, customized vans, 4 x 4s, and convertibles, two lanes, both directions on the sand, both long, wide enough and deep, close to the surf and way off the parallel commercial street. That was pretty cool, and the strip bars right off, or even right on the main vehicular drag, US1? Funky, bad, and cool. That place felt like it was supposed to: the rougher edge of something, land to sea, at least something with an edge, likely quite a bit of edge if you got in deep, which I hadn't the time for with only a day or less of liberty, but long enough for a few afternoon beers at the Pink Pussy Cat Lounge, so it was there, rough, edgy and fun, that was clear. At least that was how it looked. But here? This strip? This so-called beach? Have your picture taken, then go find a real party on the edge of the world and dive in. Head to the Keys or head up north, maybe the other coast; check out the Gulf of Mexico; but get outa' here. Definitely. This wasn't it, not at all. Imagine glowing plastic strips of neon ribbons, orange-pink and lime-green embedded into the asphalt bends and curves of the interstate coastline's roads. Get it? Everything yelled CONTRIVED! I mean, at least they coulda'

been white strips reflecting light for the traffic. Sickening. It took exactly one visit in a bathing suit to stroll along the sand to come up with that harsh assessment, and it stuck. Now, that didn't mean there wasn't any action down on the strip; there was, but that action was mainly on the streets, on the sidewalks, in the alleys and in the bars and dance clubs, and of them there were so many and so much, almost one on top of the other, up and down the strip and up and down and up the side streets, both sides, back and forth, interspersed with restaurants, hotels, motels, gift shops, pizza and hotdog counters, cheap and trendy fashion stores, others higher-end and fancy, beach wear, and the usual consumer accoutrements: Coppertone, Hawaiian Punch, Pepperidge Farm, Oreos, Fiddle Faddle, Budweiser, Miller, Marlboro, Coors, Newports, McDonalds and Colonel Sanders. Welcome to the wonderful world of the red, white, and blue.

By now it was the middle of the fall, either late October or the middle of November. The Sunshine State snowbird crowd was gathering up. No longer was there the desolate scene like at the Chicago Brass Rail in August, depressing by itself, so count that as another good. One particular place that caught my fancy, right on the strip itself, not up any side streets or off any alleys, right off center, Las Olas and US1, was called *The Button*, and it was hot and happening day and night, a high-profile joint with like a three-dollar cover charge for which you gained access and a bar drink, not bad. You could enter in the afternoon, right off the beach in shorts, T-shirts, and sandals, where it was cool and dark to get well-lit and tanked up, then dance to Michael Jackson's *Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough*, alone or with others, even a group of strangers, it didn't matter. You could do the same at night, barely having to change clothes, maybe just a shirt with a collar, if that. The doormen and bouncers had discretion, and since it was right across from that pathetic, imitation, postcard beach, taken together it meant life here was supposed to be informal and fun, which it sort-of was, both, which is to say, we're still at all *good*. Now here's where things get *not-so-good*. Call them *bad*.

For example, one night I'd be there, really juiced and loose, having fun and still playing, but gaining no traction in the 24-Hour Game. At a certain point, the frustration of failure, like at Butch Cassidy's, added to the suffering

brought on by a deep and steady gnawing emptiness, a kind of acute despair that only knew how to express itself or seek relief by doing damage, physical and otherwise, both to a target or targets, but often, as a direct and often inevitable consequence, to myself as well, just for recklessness' sake, a *don't give a fuck* measure, the mark of a deeply wounded *id*. There's a bit of *ugly* for ya' bleedin' right on through. As noted, closing time was a hard 2 a.m., which meant *last call* was around 1:30, and then you and everybody else save staff were out the door by then, pronto, no exceptions. There were cops on the corner, meaning that when the doors shut, the shop closed, so there was a time constraint, that inexorable and merciless reality, pressing. If I couldn't connect in the bar, where there were still a dwindling few "last call" options and possibilities available, it wasn't likely to get any easier out on the streets, where most decent and even half-way decent folks weren't around and about anymore that late. With all that, there was mounting pressure—not even necessarily horny, but still lonely, on the edge of despair, and for a woman, not a dog, not a friend, not even a relative, but a live female, a warm-bodied woman. Even a stranger in the night would do. In fact, a stranger was just fine; in fact, sometimes even perfect, because aside from the estrogen fix I craved, or whatever it actually was, not much else really mattered. Now, outside, heavily tanked up and on the prowl, hungry, empty, lonely and in dire need of relief, it was time to do something.

It's 2:10 a.m. and I'm headed to my Newport Custom wondering where to take her on my magical mystery prowl for pussy tour, but before reaching the spot where she's parked, waiting patiently for her master and driver, I'm gonna need a few things to keep me going while continuing on my desperate quest. Let's see, maybe another beer or a pack of smokes, a lighter, a stick of gum, whatever, necessitating a quick stop in a deli-bodega-convenience store open late, as most of them were down at the strip for just my breed of nocturnal clientele, but not exactly like me. I'm glad they're open, and even though that's a relief of sorts by itself, the painfully empty feeling continues to inspire resentment and grow just a bit more ornery by the minute. *Where's my bitch? Why am I alone? What the fuck? Fuck this!* It isn't going to end well, the encounter with the twenty-something-year-old, hick-lookin', Dudley Do-Right store clerk. I don't know exactly how or why, but I can sense it. It just won't. And sure enough, not

long after entering the all-glass, brightly lit, and easily visible from the street interior, the rows of shelves and cashier's counter, and beginning to browse the wares, stubborn stupidity via John Barleycorn and the ever-looming impulse towards destruction, even if it means self-destruction, arrived, unbridled, and now the voice of ugly in characteristically full command. I pick up a candy bar or a soda from the refrigerator, maybe a beer or a bag of chips, not sure what, but an item easily carried with one hand and raise it to about shoulder height, making sure to put it on display for the clerk, indicating what would ordinarily be my intention to buy it and leave, but this time, with a distinct modification. This time I'd take it and leave without bothering to perform the customary but annoying paying-for-it ritual. Just like that. Fuck you. What are you gonna' do about it, mister do-right too-dumb-for-college dip-shit? Jump across the counter and swing? Let's go. That type of low-end kick, he was going to get a taste of what I felt like right now, tonight, back to my time-tested and standard go-to remedy, share the pain.

In my world, this one was the nadir of *the ugly* that particular evening. That poor guy doing the graveyard shift downtown for pennies while just about everyone else his age was out partying or at home in bed, was bad enough without having some drunken clown giving him completely unwarranted grief, the hard way, and me making a complete drunken jackass of myself at the same time in late-night public, a busy corner of the strip, which was followed by *the bad*, the cops, the handcuffs, and the drunk wagon. It seemed like they patrolled maybe a slow, six-by-two or three-block rectangle, making a complete circuit, absent a call about every ten minutes, and by the time they cruised past us, there was already a noticeable commotion inside, as everything was highly visible and easily seen through the outer glass walls of the compact storefront. There must have been some sort of physical altercation, though there were no injuries or commensurate charges. It was more like a game of drunken *keep-a-way*, just busting balls like a stupid, drunken, nutcase kid looking for distraction and cheap kicks to keep the piercing agony of chronic loneliness at bay for another hour or so, or maybe even all night. But there was a price to pay for such a diversion, of course: the rest of the night was in fact spent not so lonely but in the close company of fellow travelers, collected together by the

Broward County Sheriff's Department and deposited in the Broward County Sheriff's Department over-crowded drunk tank for the night, to be seen by a judge or a desk sergeant in the morning. In that pathetic sense, my objective was met.

The next morning, another wakeup in police-prison purgatory felt like about what you'd expect, except less. It turned out that the appearance before the judge was only for serious cases, misdemeanors, and above. Mine was a mere infraction, a violation of civil code, not penal law, a *drunk and disorderly* or *public intoxication* charge, meaning the clerk probably never even registered a formal complaint with the court. It just wasn't worth the time and expense. Anyway, once I showed my bogus, store-bought ID that had my photo and last name conveniently listed as *Kaye*, an alias, the desk sergeant gave me an official FLPD appearance ticket with a court date in a few weeks, which was promptly discarded as soon as they let me out and back into the brutal south Florida, hangover-bashing sun. To my mind, it was just another night out, one I'd be fully recovered from by the end of the day, if not before the evening, when I'd be back out on the streets, in my car, or at *Auntie Mame's*, no worse for wear and tear, which was exactly what being "*free, white, and twenty-one*" was supposed to be all about as far as I could tell. Life was a cabaret!

More good

Yeah, meanwhile back at *Auntie Mame's*, while the crowd was shuffling its way out, exhausted but satisfied by all the spectacularly happy *feelgoodisms* delivered by the house, I held my new post, which was now the end position after the flag-waving act at the close, up on the landing at the top of the easterly staircase, facing downwards and towards the crowd on the main floor while providing support for the children and older folks descending the tall passageway after a full meal, drinks, and plenty of foot-stompin' and cheerleadin'. As all this orderly commotion was playing out, a young female, a blond with her share of curves, thick and pretty, maybe twenty or twenty-one, was ascending the steps, like a salmon swimming up the stream, a single determined fish leaping towards me, undeterred by

traffic, purposeful though relaxed. When she finally reaches me, she stands right in front of me, leaning her face in and close to mine, then announces with quiet enthusiasm that "*you are the handsomest guy I've ever seen.*" BINGO! Ladies and gentlemen WE HAVE A WINNER! The official clock I formally set and kept track of during deliberately timed rounds of *the game* never even started, she beat me to it. With those sweet words, she threw her arms around my neck and shoulders and then planted a big smooch on my lips, right on the smacker. Something like that; it's admittedly vague. What is clear, though, is that I told her that the shift ended at 2 a.m. and that I'd be out there after we broke down, around 2:30, and to wait for me out front in the parking lot until then, which is exactly what happened. When I got out there, her car, one of the few still around, the one with the sleeping blond with her head at rest in her arms folded across the steering wheel, was an easy spot. Shortly after waking her up by tapping gently on the closed driver's window, calling her by name, just above a whisper, "*Doris... Doris! Wake up! It's me, Mr. Most Handsome,*" and somehow we ended up back where she was supposed to be that night—at my place, behind J.M.'s, who would be long asleep by this time. The lady either followed by driving herself, or we switched to my ride and I took her since she was already quite well-sauced when she introduced herself so memorably to me. Even awake, she was in no great shape to drive, not even the short distance between points *A* and *B*. This was yet another *no-big surprise* event, the flip side of ending up in the drunk tank with a court case and a hangover as souvenirs since it was always a great party over there at *Auntie Mame's*, always good energy, nary a scuffle, cops never even had to step out of their cars, so she was all of her bold and comfortable self inside before snoring peacefully at her dashboard just outside. Upon further reflection, Doris, Doris Ann Williams of the Lauderdale Williamses, was probably not at all fit to drive, so it's more than likely that the ol' reliable Newport Custom caboose came in handy once again.

This tête-à-tête with Miss Williams led to a few more dates, though the only one I can remember is the first intimate one, the one that followed our sudden and engaging meeting at *Mame's*, followed by a rapid get-together later that night in my backdoor lair. This second or third old-style formal date began at her parent's house, where she lived while home from school and

where I agree to pick her up and meet her folks there. They had a very stylish but low-key ranch house on one of the canals, maybe a quarter of an acre of property, maybe less, but palm tree-covered, shady, comfortable, with a deck right on the water, and very comfortable, just them and the 'gators. She said her dad was in the energy business, which could mean a lot of things. He was some type of VP or above, that's what she said, though I never asked and didn't really care, a *VP for what?* But the Fred MacMurray-style guy, with his pipe and slippers, was curious about me. Apart from taking out his daughter, it was unusual for him to meet a guy my age, so young, so far away from home, so far from mommy and daddy, entirely on his own and seemingly so self-reliant, with a car, an apartment, and a job, and as she later told me, he was impressed. Though it was something of a surprise to hear, I believed it and, for the moment, felt elevated, especially coming from a guy in his position of status, and I never forgot it. He saw that, which meant there might have been some actual truth to it, like J.M. did. Value. Me. It was a meaningful boost to my very tentative self-esteem, but apparently not quite meaningful enough. There were still a lot more risks to take and games to play before being faced with either the final abyss or growing up. I could get serious later, if I ever really wanted to or even lived long enough to, that is. In the meantime, it was party on, with or without young Doris.

More bad

The tough thing about the two-drink policy was that it was so damn hard to keep, almost impossible. At least for me, it was. Sober as a deacon, alert, hard-working, and focused all night leading to a moment of relief once the doors closed and the crowd exited the house, was that sense of ease and abandon only available by the blessings of a certain well-known gent that goes by many names, among them Jack Daniels, Johnny Walker, Jameson, Dewars, Cutty Sark and Seagrams and their many lighter close cousins like Bud, Miller, Heineken and Coors. Booze, for short. We were supposed to be locking down the shop, sweeping the floors, putting away the chairs and stacking the tables, and breaking things down before the final shutting off of the lights and locking the doors. This was when the two drinks became

available, and since there was no crowd, the remaining bartender or stand-in could serve you right away. That meant quick action and fast relief, like Bromo-Seltzer. It also means the triggering of a powerful hunger that only more alcohol can satisfy, and that takes a lot more than two drinks, even on an empty stomach at just after 2 a.m. At least for me, it did, so I went at it. "*Hey, boss, can you get me another?*" If he said *no*, I'd come back five minutes later and ask again. If he said *yes*, I'd come back ten minutes later and ask again. All the while still working, stacking chairs, wiping down the tables, and sweeping up, all the while still boozing. It was routine, and it didn't take much cajoling for the bartender or stand-in to serve me a third, or maybe even a fourth, given that the steady workflow was maintained and tasks were getting done. I felt entitled to drink whatever and as much as I could get the bartender or stand-ins to serve me, regardless of any such nonsense as company policy or even the law. I was just that kinda' cheerful fellow, and it was noticed, not so much by the bartenders, who didn't really care and just wanted me to stop pestering them, and maybe not by my fellow employees similarly disengaged, but by the floor bosses and house managers, whose job it was to maintain discipline in the ranks, which, along with my steady accomplice, Mr. Barleycorn, the ol' J.B. was casually disregarding. In other words, I'd earned it, so *fuck them*. I considered the two-drink limit the same way I did J.M.'s no-female guest policy. Obviously, that attitude is not one prescribed for long-term success in working with others, so after a handful of clear but polite warnings, I was let go. It was a final *fuck you* back from the house to me. Okay. I got it. Goodbye LPNs; no more flag-waving sprints; no more free hamburgers and beer; or meeting fans in the parking lot—not here, not no mo'. It's over. It's done.

Now, on to the next adventure and its steady accomplice, misadventure. This is when descent caught up with me again: nursery school, the cub scouts, summer camp, high school, the navy, the jailhouse, the T.C. (Kabbo: Volume I), Camp Impala, the last nights in Long Beach, etc., etc., etc. Once the plane touched down, survival mode kicked in, and I got myself set up and straightened out, but now it seemed like it was time to drop the ball again, time to descend and cash it all in for a barrel full of nothing, just as my father had forewarned and cursed. Off to the park bench now, back to the inevitable.

Highway of despair

One of the *last hope pit stops* on the *desperation highway* was the two-bit barroom at the corner adjacent to the local Li'l General, a neighborhood dive by J.M.'s that might not even have had a name, or if there was one, who cared? No one. Maybe the owner did, maybe not, but it was the place I'd head to around one-thirty in the morning if there were no more encouraging signs wherever I happened to be just before then. At least there, anyone still around and conscious was probably also some kinda' desperado, and if it were a female desperado, a *desperada*, or another Susan, well, we just might share something meaningful together, and I could buy some time, stave off the crushing despair for another hour, maybe the whole night, who knows? Maybe even longer. It's happened. The clock was ticking as my hollowed-out gut was aching, meaning action was required, so I stepped on it and arrived just in time for *last call*. Again, the irritating statewide hard close at two meant it was a close call. While the drink was cold and frosty, a couple locked arm in arm had just left together, so the house was dark and, except for the bartender and probably some old neighborhood guy tucked into a corner stupor or maybe the owner cleaning up in the back, the place was empty. No hope in this pit, *I Walk the Line* on the jukebox, mirroring closely how I felt, "...*alone when each day's through...*" That emptiness, the *Man in Black*, knew it well. If not, how else could he write and sing it like that? Though that was a minor comfort, there was only one thing to do now: down the beer and into the men's room; onto the floor; hands and knees in one of the filthy stalls; rancid tiles and an overpowering stench; time to close my eyes and begin to pray.

The agony of that kind of loneliness, constantly bordering on despair in its most acute form but always with me in varying degrees of intensity, is difficult to describe in a way that makes it clear without implying indulgent self-pity. Yes, there is a touch of that. I never wished any of this on myself and imagined myself like a wild branch cut off from the tree, blowing back and forth, up and down an empty street, scarring my skin along the surface, banging and lifting, flying and crashing in the wind, again and again. With all that said, the only way to handle it was to forget self-pity and blame, at least for now. Instead, face it head-on and make the best choices possible; take

the least damaging path for as long and as far as it can be traveled until, eventually, circumstances change and there might gradually, hopefully or magically appear better options and with them relief. Until then? Here goes, so let us pray. And so I prayed.

The least damaging path at this point was to pray sincerely, *foxhole style*, and then rejoin the ongoing, never-ending search for whatever relief might be found. Again, this was way beyond sexual. It wasn't so much "horniness," no looking for snakes in piles of rocks; it was as I described, so what was necessary was not so much a shared orgasm as a shared experience of closeness, a companion, a kindred if fleeting spirit from a stranger in the night, and it had to be female childbearing range; all colors, shapes, and sizes would be welcome. Simple enough, *right?* I'm easy. But at 2 a.m. on a dark and empty Tuesday morning on the vacant streets of northwest Fort Lauderdale, there wasn't a lot I knew of to be had. I also had no relatives, close friends, bosses, or even casual buddies I could rely on for fill-in company; my friends were all at least 1,200 miles away, so other than with J.M. and the yelping *hundts*, I was alone, and that's what stung so much. So alone and so stung, it felt like I was gonna' die on that shitty, piss-stained, cigarette-butt, bathroom floor, like my soul would just leap out of me quickly or drift upwards slowly and away, leaving the body empty, collapsed in a crumpled heap, face down in prayer. Instead, I prayed, just prayed, closed my eyes and spoke directly, saying what I needed in plain English, backed up by fragments of fitting Hebrew liturgy, "petitioning the Lord with prayer." I prayed for relief, I prayed for strength, I prayed for a fix until upon hearing the *last call* alert, I got up off the filthy bathroom floor, went through the motions of washing my hands, paid the tab, and, still mired deeply in a growing desperation, *walked the line* out of the bar.

Key in the ignition, she always starts so quickly with a minimum of commotion, off then on, chuga-chuga boom... running with a confident, quiet hum, it must be the premium and all the loving care I feed her—new oil every few thousand miles, attention to the tires, inflation, balance, tread, checking the fluids, the plugs, the hoses, fluids and filters, whatever, everything—all I need is a smooth, quiet ride with good sound from a decent set of speakers, easy starts, and most importantly, no grief. And

we're off. It's 2:05 a.m., and nothing's coming aside from the voice: *choose a direction, pick a destination, open your eyes wide, and start prowling*, but still, nothing's coming. Now, just off the mini-parking lot, idling at the first red-light intersection, trying to come up with a plan for the next move, my attention was drawn to the arc of movement inside, and suddenly, outside, the car idling directly across the intersection, facing me from the opposite lane on the other side of the same red light. A petite young lady, maybe in her late teens, possibly early twenties, in another one-piece hot-pants outfit was making a hasty exit from the auto via the front passenger seat side door, then, after quickly slamming it shut, began almost frantically looking through the dark at the traffic on the street. Talk about desperate. She spotted me, and within seconds after making eye contact, she was now in the front passenger seat of my car, the ol' reliable Chrysler Newport Custom, my white stallion, an impromptu, serendipitous "*Where to, ma'am?*" moment. I kid you not, ladies and gentlemen, and I draw no conclusions except were it not for that sudden appearance the prowl might have ended beyond the abyss that night, that's how desperate I felt. That said, stay tuned for more, so please read on.

She's perfect. That is, she perfectly fits the bill: late teens, maybe early twenties, clean, sexy, pretty, petite, and alone; and best of all, right here and in need of me. *Thank you, G-d! I'll never eat pork again!* (Bli neder) She mutsa' been havin' some kinda' disagreement or breakup with the dude behind the wheel, an ex-boyfriend or date-gone-suddenly, really bad, but that wasn't my business, and I didn't ask. Why look a "gift horse..."? Right? Anyway, it's all about timing, right? And all she wants is for me to take her home, to my place, where she can get a good night's sleep and go home in the morning. *Thank you, G-d! I'll never eat pork or covet my neighbor's wife again!* (Bli neder, once again)

It was late enough not to have to worry about getting past J.M.'s bloodshot eyes fixed on the backyard awaiting my entrance. He'd long since retired from his general command post, the kitchen table right in front of the always open but screened-in backdoor, where he could survey the rear of his property without so much as turning his head. He was well asleep by then, but those two mangy mutts, the elderly, arthritic dachshunds, if they woke

up? They'd commence clamoring like they were hysterical watch dogs ready to pounce, so care and quiet still had to be practiced and maintained, calling upon my best stealth and discretion practices for a delicate and mission-critical operation such as this. And she was easy, just wanting exactly what she said she wanted, and I was able to provide it, and with any more luck I'd be in a perfect position to provide a lot more. In any case, even if only for the moment, I was no longer alone, and the agony subsided, like a miracle.

Back on the grimy streets of downtown LA a year or so before (Kabbo: Volume I), there was an entire night spent through the wee dark hours wrestling with another hot, young stranger in the night of the female persuasion. Yes, another desperate time filled with loneliness mixed with the temptation to adventure, another highly desirable young lady appeared just when all felt nearly lost, Dante's Inferno "abandon all hope..."-style lost, ready to give in to despair and drink myself into oblivion, die in the gutter, a martyr to my sorrow, or a jail cell, maybe all three in stages, but suddenly, the day, or night, was saved, simply by her arrival and continued presence, and especially when in bed together, barely robed, hitting all the surface spaces but not precisely to the core. Despite, or maybe because of that, both fleeting encounters served as bridges to the other side of that dark chasm by providing the closeness, physical intimacy, and attention that made the female part of the need so essential. It was only that kind of closeness, to whatever degree—first, second, or third—a homer or a grand slam—and only that could satisfy the chronic and debilitating hunger. The events were not, however, zero/sum. In both cases, the stranger would allow for no consummation; they had their lines and stuck to them, resisting my persistent but playful, sometimes urgent wrestling for position and advantage. In an odd but memorable way, these exercises completed themselves without consummating shared sexual bliss. Was it more lust, or was it more of a soul hunger? Were they the same? Was it both? Could they be separated and examined independently, satisfied or unsatisfied on their own? To me, it's obvious that after two, if not more, and possibly many other long-forgotten examples, the latter is almost always truer. It's a much deeper problem than merely satisfying a primal lust, which is either a substitute for or a discernible mirage of the force of psychic pair bonding.

Sometimes, rarely, but most preciously, they are coincidental and complimentary, a phenomenon some call "true love." In any case, this was exactly what happened here as well. The sexual flame, though well-lit, left its burning thirst unquenched, but the human void, the deeper need for contact and connection, was satisfied. She needed something from me, and it was something I could, needed to, and did provide, and in the process, I felt her skin, heard her breathe, sensed the warmth in the bed next to mine, heard her voice, and felt the quick brush of her hair against my shoulder. Just like with Lisa back in Brooklyn at age four or five, that deeper and more permanent wound of emptiness was assuaged, such that it got me through and across the pitiless chasm of the dark Fort Lauderdale night. Both are vividly remembered to this day, except this time in the Sunshine State, with a richer level of irony. I'll get to it.

By the time the morning rolled around, after a night spent mostly sleepless and wrestling (I did let her get some shut-eye), I knew quite a bit more about this young damsel than I did when she first so suddenly jumped aboard. Everything seemed to suggest how heavenly it would surely be to like actually seal the deal with her: her taste, sensitivity, strength, sound, and touch; her breath so warm; her short-cropped dark hair and copper skin so soft and firm; her dark brown eyes so deep and wide; but now it was time to complete part two of her request, the one I agreed to when she first introduced herself with such brazen urgency fueled by desperation, which was to give her a lift home in the morning. It was well within the Broward area; her declared destination, not more than a twenty- or twenty-five-minute drive from J.M.'s. The hardest part, especially after a sleepless night, was getting past the old salt and his crotchety canine alarm critters, but it was no real big deal. I had a method by then: wait until he leaves for a regular bathroom break, or check the front door, maybe visit the living room, anything, then vamoose. If the critters started yelping, as they frequently did, the event would blend in with all the other times they regularly sounded nervous false alarms, and by the time the old man made it back there to investigate, we'd be gone. So, though a pain-in-the-ass routine I'd soon tire of, for today, as they say in the Everglades, it was much ado about nothing. Anyway, after getting past J.M. and the hundts and driving along our early morning less-than-merry way, she didn't appear in the least bit interested in

extending our engagement and only occasionally broke her silence to announce directions; there was no other conversation, no eye contact, no smiles, and she seemed eager to put the whole episode behind her as soon as possible, which was exactly the instant after we stopped and she opened the passenger's side door of my car and quickly closed it with almost the same force of finality she did the other dude's car the night before and headed towards the chain-link gate of the trailer park entrance she called home. Before disappearing beyond that line and forever into the past, as if I'd never asked before, but now, again, "*Hey! Before you go, what's your name?*" I did; she turned to me and said her name was *Angel*, and with that, she was gone as suddenly as she appeared. Yeah, I guess she was. I mean really. What else? It totally fits, more merciful than carnal, so I believe it. Why not?

Letting go and slipping back

By this stage of my great Sunshine State escape, the figuring was to make some additional use of the time and distance by expanding territory while employing my latest side-hustle profession as a ruthlessly determined commodities broker, i.e., a scrap-metal scavenger on wheels. All you need is a magnet and a dream. And a car. And gas. And a buyer for the scrap. And yeah, I'd been *good* long enough, making payments on everything, including the rent and the car, showing up, all that, which started to seem a whole lot like unnecessary nuisances, the whole *responsibility* thing. All I wanted to do now was get drunk, get laid, and sleep late. The voice: *Was that asking for too much from life? Why have to deal with all those oppressive burdens imposed by others?* Well, just as the questions seemed more meaningful, timely, and relevant, the answers started to seem just as scarce. *Really? Pay rent? So, I could play cat and mouse with J.M. over female companionship? Did I really need another obstacle on a project I was fully committed to 24-7? Did I really need a steady job? Did I really like getting up early in the morning for work, delivering hospital beds and oxygen tanks to the dying?* It was a bit much, all that sweating and ass kissin' for pennies and crumbs. *Two drinks?* Come on. Eye-patch Blaze could wait a week or two more for his next fifty, *right?* Maybe even the *next*

next. That's what it felt like—nothing traumatic, just a growing undercurrent of nihilistic apathy creeping back in, teetering precariously on the brink of familiar despair, a subtle clouding over of the rays of sunshine that had returned since receiving my walking papers from *Auntie Mame's*. However disappointing it was, that declaration of independence led to a more adventurous, freelance survivalist's challenge: hunting scrap metal with a magnet: if it sticks to the magnet? Forget it. Leave it. If not? Grab it. It's almost gold, which was a helluva' lot more fun and usually paid more too than bussing tables or manhandling oxygen tanks for the dead or soon to be, if you were lucky and needy enough. The proceeds went directly to the necessities: filling the gas tank and my empty belly. Anything left over went to beer. There was a very cool family place called Grady's (or something like that), right on the boulevard where you could indulge in an afternoon feast of southern fried fixin's buffet style, with the whole cliché of vittles and varmints: yams, perfectly fried chicken parts, ham steaks, mashed potatoes, steaming fresh cornbread that had to cool down before biting in, tons of butter on everything, salad, it just kept coming, hot and fresh, with no end in sight: biscuits, gravy, collard greens, corn on-the-cob, the whole menu, a banquet, and all for one flat, low price, and so became an informal weekly event on my roster. If the tank was full and I was too, all was good, quite good, or just about good enough. It came down to that. Slipping and sliding, hand to mouth or magnet to mouth, letting it all go. Piece by piece. Step by step. Everything. Intentionally or otherwise, the descent was a forgone conclusion, i.e., unstoppable.

On the way back from returning (the) *Angel*, I detoured around towards the usual hunting grounds off the main highways—the abandoned or barely populated industrial parks and trash dumps where there might be plenty of abandoned scrap metal—the scrap that would not stick to a magnet that I could somehow crush, fold up, and cart away in my *scrapmobile*, again, the trusty Newport Custom. I'd prowl around dumpsters and garbage heaps, searching for anything that looked like abandoned metal, touching everything that might be right with the small magnet a momentary mentor donated after explaining its purpose. Once I spotted something promising, say, an eight-foot aluminum step ladder with a bent step or a busted rail, any visible defect rendering it unworthy of repair, I'd grab it, verify it with the

trusty magnet, then step on it, bend it, crush it or drive over it, whatever, but get it into the car where along with the rest of the haul jammed into the back seat and trunk, and sometimes even the front seat too, even if I had to keep the windows open and the trunk open but tied almost shut, just get it on board. When secured for travel like that, I'd take only the quieter side streets, bypassing the cops and any other unwanted attention to this unseemly display, and drive off to the closest open scrap yard where they'd weigh it right in front of you, the whole contraption, car and scrap, gross weight, then remove the scrap, take what they liked, weigh the car again minus the net, and that was your number, something like that, but definitely and quickly convertible to cash, right now, right then, right there. Just sign here. Nice. Fun, a scavenger hunt my life depended on. Livin' large. A free spirit movin' on, chewin' tobacco, spittin' it out the driver's side window while cruising the boulevards and strip, splattering the panels with brown-stained glory, like I had all over the office supply *outfit's* delivery van but seldom bothered to clean. *Why?* I'm only gonna do it again, but the Newport's? Her panels were cleaned after each drive. *Large* like that.

But again, there was the routine raucous revelry on the edge: just a few weeks later another night in the Broward County drunk tank, another release in the morning. Who knows why that time, but for something similar, a disorderly this or that, using the same name and ID, *the guy who never showed up for the last case was back again*, so? Nothing whatever, again out in the morning with another crumpled up, tossed away piece of county paper with a date and an alias. *Fuck them*. And you know what else? They didn't care either; they were just sweeping the pathetic drunks off the Lauderdale strip. It was another nightly routine during the holiday winter season, not chasing bank robbers, biker-gangs, or drug dealers, so only worth so much sweat and paperwork, paid for by expensive county taxes, just enough to keep the businesses thriving and paying theirs, and the tourists largely safe from the drunken ruffraff, especially the ones from out-of-state who came to spend leisure dollars and then go back home. That's about it though, but now, time two – judging by the head-nods and double-takes from a few of Mr. Kaye's hosts in blue upon his arrival at the precinct house, he was already beginning to become something of a local, low-end

celebrity guest. They recognized me, I might've even detected a grin. How flattering.

Long about then, admittedly hazy, as a miasma of nihilistic deterioration settled in, though the sequences and direct relationships between people and events are not so clear, the events themselves, taken individually and as a whole, are mostly vivid. There was the vaguely sketchy cat who worked for Blaze the eye-patch, his full-time floor manager and main mechanic, a slim guy in his late thirties or early forties who supervised the other two or three part-time tire jockeys and oil-changers and still wore an early Beatles-style mop-top haircut but let it go salt and pepper gray. It's hard to say why he seemed somehow sketchy; it may have been his quiet tone or the haircut, it might be no reason at all, but it was somehow there, something I felt. Despite that? All in all, though? He was a pretty cool character for a laid-back, non-filtered, chain-smoking hillbilly dude who went by the name of Ron or Roy or something, or maybe even Ringo for kicks, but I doubt it. Anyhow, J.M. had a fairly new, fairly large color TV in the studio he rented me in perfect working order, which I figured to be worth at least \$50—a car payment, hot. *Hot* like sold by a fence *hot*. That would mean I'd discreetly transfer ownership from one party to the next, and the receiving party would provide the requisite cash compensation. The decision to move out and on had already been made. It'd been a few months; it was like mid-December by now, and I'd been there since August and was growing increasingly annoyed and tired of the added cat-and-mouse angle to the 24-Hour Game, so it was looking like splitsville for me and the nosey old dude. Furthermore, figuring that since he had a fifty-dollar security deposit of mine, well, it'd be a fair exchange, except I wasn't negotiating with or asking anybody. The plan was to steal it. All that was required was a buyer, which is what brought Ron the hillbilly mechanic with the Beatle-do into the picture. Yeah, Roy was interested right away. No slick sales talk or arm-twisting necessary; it was a straight-up deal from the start, word one, a new TV like that would be worth three or four times that much. He never bothered to ask where it was coming from, but I'm quite certain that as a semi-truthful vendor and almost friend, it was made explicitly clear to him that this was to be a very, very low-key transaction and would need to remain that way on-going. An appliance of that size and weight wasn't

likely to get moved around a lot or otherwise attract much outside attention anyway, so it wouldn't be tough to keep the deal quiet, but neighbors talk. It was a *put it down and leave it alone* kind of appliance. Heavy. Big tubes. Lota' back box. But he got it. *Omerta*. The price was set, and so were we. All that was left for completion was the late-night delivery and the cash payment—cash on the barrel—right away, just like with the scrap metal hustle, only without the paperwork.

Everything that follows can only be accessed through the same miasmic channel, so bear with the vague chronology; it's not that important anyway. All this was happening around the same time: the winter of '79-'80 in south Florida, hand to mouth, living in my car, mostly parked at night somewhere just off State Road 84, more locally known as *Alligator Alley*. Yup, me an' them there gators, washing up wherever I happened to be working or in a gas station bathroom with a running sink and a door that could actually close and a light that could actually be turned on and a toilet that could, well, you guessed it. There were also friends, local acquaintances more precisely, or even more precisely and descriptively, a small tribe of lost and wandering, bordering on or actually homeless young men with whom I found myself loosely joined up with sharing resources, like the blind guy and Frankenstein's monster: "*Smoke! Fire! Friends!*", minus the innocence.

Beauties and beasts

A few blocks from J.M.'s was another kind of alley I stumbled on to in my explorations: an alley that ran through the center of a suburban block, sort of dividing it in half, creating an unofficial dirt road lane between the rears of one-family houses and properties on each side, like an extended driveway running the interior length of the block, opening up the interior to both foot and automobile traffic, but everyone within the block could use it to enter or exit from each of the two perpendiculars, paved, and mapped streets to or from their little backyard patch of dirt where they could legally park while not impeding the flow. The layout created a small community of neighbors based initially, almost exclusively, on the regular shared use of that dirt road

path and the backyards and families that faced each other. Once the lost tribe began to appear, a car or two at a time, it was all one big happy campfire family. But the visiting tribe of lost boys soon evolved from the dealer's customers and hanger-arounders into another set of relationships based almost exclusively on females, two in particular: a very hot one and her cute but chubby younger sister, who idolized her sibling all out of proportion to the Addams Family flop-house they lived in. Trouble. They attracted this collection of aimless types who were otherwise hosted in part by one of their pot-dealing next-door neighbors, but now they mostly gathered in, on, or around the girls and their house while still sleeping in their cars, in sleeping bags, or on the drug dealer's back porch, the core of whom actually had semi-permanent rooms in a rented house, and since I was mesmerized by the older one too, thus by default joined the club. That, and the fact that by then I had already moved out of J.M.'s and into my car.

Positioned close to one end of the alley, these stunning Daisy Mae and Bobby Joe starlets lived in what we up nawth call a two-story Bowery-bum-style flop house or maybe what folks down below the Mason-Dixon call trailer-park trash, but in a house, not on wheels. They weren't goin' nowhere as they appeared quite comfortable exactly where and as they were: in a dump, covered with crawling, creeping, and flying insects and accumulated filth, dust, dirt, and grime; dead insects crusted into corners; water beetles; ant colonies; mosquitoes by the squadron; lone-wolf spiders; battalions of roaches in formation patrolling the walls and surfaces for rotted food, a whole gruesome menagerie the likes of which I'd never even imagined. And the roaches? They had no fear, not even the courtesy to *scram* if you shined a flashlight on them. They just ignored you and kept on keepin' on instead, and who knows what else may have gone unseen? Vermin and stray cats picked through the trash tossed and gathered beneath the houses lined up and down the alley, but especially, it seemed to me, right here on the front porch steps of their humble abode, where the ladies attracted all manner of living things, and certainly, there was a steady cast of ever-arriving and departing lost boys looking to connect. A lot of flotsam and jetsam. There lived the lovely, young, blond maidens in their late teens and their freaked-out older brother, a big, fat, shoulder-length, thick, greasy dark-hair, bad-acned-faced, loud-mouthed and deliberately (though

awkwardly) effeminate like he was trying to play some sort of Tiny Tim half-a-faggot character, or a Tiny Tim meets Ozzy Osborne tub of southern-fried lard. He was well over two hundred and twenty pounds, mostly blubber, but there was some muscle in there too, and together had some force, probably about five foot ten or eleven. He wore black nail polish on his fingers and dark eye makeup, and was always around because he never worked, chain-smoked, and was always getting himself involved in whatever conversation might be taking place, even though they never had anything to do with him. He just demanded the attention, and since it was his place and he was so fuckin' large and potentially dangerous, there was no getting rid of him. He had to be tolerated—a guy dreaming he was Meatloaf but who was actually a lot more like Divine without a shred of musical talent while immersed in a strip-mall version of a rock'n'roll delusion. He looked like one of those plastic doll replicas of a rock star—not the rock star, the doll. Yeah, just about tolerable, but still, a pain in the ass that had to be dealt with or managed to get to them, or at least one of them, the slightly older, quieter, thinner one that had all the testosterone in the whole neighborhood on fire. Yeah, she was that sweet and sexy, like a Cybill Shepherd girl-next-door type in her prime, totally right everywhere: no makeup, neither of them, no need, soft-spoken and kinda' shy while at the same time subtly hinting at the possibility of sharing a deep and lasting promiscuity; a young Blanche Dubois that had strangers lining up daily with offers of kindness. I'm not sure who was with her at the time, but I am sure it wasn't me and that we were all on line and constantly jockeying for positions. Closer was better. The other one, the younger, was cute too, another very pretty natural blond; I can see how some might even prefer her, she looked happier and more open, but slightly on the chunky side, so while she got attention, they both did, the thinner one got me infected and crazed, so I stuck around, waiting with eyes open for my possible turn.

To keep me returning there after work every day, parked in the alley, waiting in line to wash up in the dealer's house, then drinking, smoking, and eating with the boys before sacking out drunk again in my back seat, I had to have some hope, everyone did, so at uncertain and irregular intervals she gave it. I'm sure not just to me, but to whoever she felt like giving some to whenever she might have felt like doing so. For example, that afternoon

when we were so close, four or five of us partying quietly at the small picnic table inside their mostly screened-in but torn, heavily shadowed, roach-infested front porch, seated just across from each other, our legs and feet only inches apart beneath the table, when for an instant we locked eyes as she gently stroked the skin of my naked shin with the toes of a single bare foot, softly grazing my leg with the nails. Since it was under the table top no one saw, but there were a couple of the local tribe members seated with us, joining in the same informal chat, drinking together, smoking, enjoying the relaxed loose laughter, ignoring the filth and the loud, stupid, butting in brother and the occasional roach falling suddenly from its position in line on the ceiling wall brigade, dropping right in, maybe into your open beer or your gesturing hand as you were making a point which we all did our politest best to ignore, shake it off and keep talking without skipping a beat. It happened. I felt her and almost lost it; a sudden fever rush at the realization, so unexpected and yet so deliberate, a slow drag down the inside calf of my right shin, no facial reaction from her aside from the one she wore just before and as she did it, deadpan, and aside from the quick, concurrent flash of eye contact during the slow drag, no visible indicator whatsoever, she never missed a beat either, as if it weren't happening, but for me, the surprise sensation merged with that sudden, electrifying glance, *lawdhavmurcy*, now breathless, my throat dried, the memory indelible. So, you know, there was bound to be some kinda' trouble brewing. It wasn't just me, and I knew it. It wasn't only my shin that she graced with her attention; on that point, there was no mistake. She gave just enough to keep everyone there—all the guys, all of us online, like the roaches, frustrated, competitive, stubborn, and always wanting or falling from position. So, you also *knew* there'd be trouble, there had to be. You just knew it, same like back at the *Arizona*, and of course, there was.

All along, I never stopped working. Job after job came and went: scraping barnacles off yacht hulls for a day at Miller's Yacht; *fuck that*; a shift or two as a clerk at the Li'l General; *fuck that too*; two, maybe three shifts as a busboy at another novelty restaurant set up on a luxury boat docked semi-permanently in the canals when on the big opening night the office supply outfit lady and her husband came, partly for the event and partly to check up on me (they didn't really like me working a second job), the dark cloud

following me to and from each, one to the next. It was the same dark cloud that appeared that morning after that terrible night of the car crash, the loss of my wheels and property, and the Route 66 dream of making it down south and coming back ready to once again establish myself, this time as a man of means and property with a big future in America's Healthiest City in ashes. Now I live in my car in a rural alley, hunting scrap metal for gas money. Dammit, I had to sort through the wreckage and get back up, which I did, and for a moment was back in full-on survival mode again. It seemed to recede at times, and for spells, it even occasionally disappeared, eclipsed by the sunlight or moon glow or the quick, furtive glance of Daisy Mae, but once again, it was here, growing, darkening, stubbornly present, still following and menacing me, never entirely letting go. Instead, it bided time, always somewhere just above me, hovering, looming, or just a step or two behind me, waiting for me to stumble so it could catch up, day after day, *the park bench*, quietly suggested the inaudible voice, intruding just beneath conscious thought, week after week, day after day, job after job.

Myron Lieberman: "I eat like I have two assholes."

Those were his words; describing himself to me, not mine. But they fit. He had to weigh over three hundred pounds, standing at about five feet ten or whatever, just under or maybe even at six feet. Taken as a whole, the picture was so large and looming that the full immensity was tough to gauge from only a single perspective, so I don't really know, but he was large, massive. You would have needed tools to do the measuring, but I got his point—the one he was making to me while giving me some sort of pep talk in his office. The dark-haired trucking company founder's son in his thirties was confiding in me his weakness, while brandishing a nine-millimeter pistol and placing it down close to him on the desktop as a visual. His point was that he had my back and wanted me to stand up to the two long-term co-workers he assigned me to as their helper on the moving trucks, one of whom, the white guy, was giving the new guy, me, grief, i.e., a hard time. The black guy, his dark-skinned and muscular shotgun, well, he didn't bother me much, never instigated or provoked me but he wasn't about to do for me what I was unwilling to do for myself. Understood. He was another

short, quiet brute of about thirty years, but aside that, a decent and hard-working guy. Nevertheless, in sum, it was him and the other guy, the driver and crew boss, the white guy, a slim, mid-twenties, long-haired and red-necked country boy and under-employed circus clown moonlighting as a moving man, against me. That was clear again, the New Yorker, the new guy, the outsider, me. Though it never got physical, the verbal abuse was steady and annoying—the ugly kind of disrespect and menace you have to nip in the bud or, barring that, hold back until the fuse is lit and the blowout erupts, but by then it's usually handcuffs and ambulance time. It's like quicksand; the longer you're around, the deeper it gets, and something bad, for sure, is going to happen unless you climb out of it. The boss, Myron, another transplanted New Yorker, and another fading Beatle haircut wearer, musta' heard about it and my passive response, or non-response, and wanted to bolster me as a fellow landsman with a similar business interest: moving, trucking, handling mainly a New York to Florida and back route, steady runs, ideal for me, and even went so far as to tell me when I first hired on that I was "*the perfect size*" to be a moving man. That would mean compact enough to maneuver in tight spots like elevator shafts, narrow stairwells, and truck peaks, but at the same time strong enough to get the items placed and the job done without damage or delay. That was encouraging, yes, but the overriding problem was, at least for me and on my end, that the cloud of doom followed and disabled me, preventing me from being or even reacting as my full self. I felt hollow, weak, weighed down, empty, and even at times desperate, lost, and alone, so the encouragement, while appreciated, had negligible effect. I was drowning in a pit of self-alienation, tired of treading water, and kind words weren't going to save me, nor was the nine-millimeter, which even for me would have been for them a bit of unwarranted overkill. No one was threatening to harm, so though it was annoying, "*Hey, New York, I told you to grab the lamps first, do they look like lamps to you? What're you, slow? Special needs?*" It wasn't really all that important, certainly not existential, just another shadow cast by the cloud. All I needed to do was look him in the eye, tell him to shut the fuck up, and take it from there. If he swung, I'd deal with it, but he better knock me out, and it didn't look like he could, but either it just wasn't in me, as I really couldn't be bothered aside from nodding and my expression, the "*Okay, keep pushing*" look. There were more pressing

concerns and I was already in *defeated* mode, living in my car, washing up in gas stations, cashing paychecks at barrooms, and then shoplifting MD 2020 at the Li'l General—the high life—so I didn't.

One foggy yet memorable moment came during what was one of my last days on the job with them. It was an early morning start outside the country ranch-style home where we arrived, ready to pack them out and begin rolling out, when, through the thick morning mists, could be heard an occasional sound that made no sense at all for where we were. A quiet morning just outside the Everglades might offer a variety of natural sounds that a Brooklyn boy isn't used to hearing and unable to identify, but this one sounded completely out of place, like a faint roar of some kind of animal, a big one, and which could be felt almost like low thunder from a distance, like a lion's roar? Was it just me? No one else seemed to notice. Had I finally, fully cracked? It repeated, not frequently—maybe only two or three times in twenty minutes—but often enough to be unmistakable. What the fuck? Of course, the clown knew right away where it came from and eventually spoke up: the winter parking spot for the local circus, so yeah, it was a lion's roar. Well, I'll be gosh darned. Jiminy Crickets and a happy Monday to all! Now I musta' heard everythin', and I'm not fire-water loco. The world is. Crazy. Hand me that tin of fresh chewin' tobacco, son. This was another indelible, and a week or less after that, I bid Myron and his two assholes farewells, calling Lieberman's Moving and Storage, the inbred circus clown and his charcoal shotgun man, a wrap. Let Mack and Meyer find another bitch to punk or tear each other to shreds for all it meant—less than a fuck to me—and since I'd already blown it with uncharacteristic passivity, it would be too much work to get it straightened back out now and not worth a bloody nose or another trip to the Broward County police motel. That's what I heard in the distant roar that early morning, so there was another voice to follow, and just like that, this rudely awakened, still shadowed, wounded beast then headed back to the job market, out of the thick Everglade mist and the distant winter circus roar.

Next up, a few days after hearing that call of the wild and while still enmeshed in the fringe of the backyard lost boys tribe, I responded to my once again state of unemployment by picking up a gig as a construction

laborer in Hallandale, a few towns south on 95, a twenty-minute drive and less than a gallon or two of gas round-trip. With that, and like trucking, because of Jackhammer Dave, I had a bit of experience and knew a trowel from a hammer and sheetrock from plywood. I still didn't really like it, backbreaking and knuckle-busting, but it was a means to an end. The coolest thing about this job—converting a vacant commercial space on the main boulevard, Hallandale Beach Boulevard, with its own exit off 95, an abandoned factory, or an empty warehouse into a rock club—was that we construction laborers were all promised jobs at the club once it opened. Until then? They paid about a buck an hour more than *minimum*, not bad for semi-skilled labor in the sunshine slave state of Florida. So, there we were again, that kinda' nightclub, showbiz, nightlife construction dude crowd. For whatever reason or reasons, this time I came prepared, experienced and confident, not gonna let nobody sweat me, because here, especially with this crew, I fit in. These folks seemed to have both mothers and fathers who were otherwise not related, full sets of teeth, and college degrees, even the laborers, so making friends right away was pretty easy. "Pass me the hammer," "watch your back," "coming through," followed by lunch on the bricks in the dust and shade, one or two beers after work at 5 p.m., not 2 a.m., so I didn't get tripped up, developing that type of in-the-trenches camaraderie. If I hung in there long enough, I might hear a lion roar again before some good would sporadically break through, the cloud might momentarily recede, and out in front of it, under the sun, I'd shine and ride for as long as it shone.

Back at the alley, there it was: me, my toothbrush, some clothing, and my car. I had canceled the color TV caper and never went through with it, so I was minus one projected ill-gotten fifty. Instead, because I left the place a mess, let J.M. keep the fifty security deposit he was gonna need to pay the maid for the extra cleaning work, but thank Neptune's Trident I took nothing else. He wouldn't have deserved that, and I didn't need it on my head, not for fifty bucks, despite how much that would have meant in gasoline and food. There was enough *ugly* already fueling the cloud, so at practically the last minute, just before closing the door and splitting for good, decided against it. He wasn't a bad old dude at all, though he did bust balls when I was low on options. It was a wash in my book and worth repeating; life went

on and easier without any added guilt weighing me even further down, especially being so low as it was, a hanger-on at a flop-house, sleeping outside in his car, you know, livin' it up guilt-free like that. The dealer's house in the alley near or next to the girls' was like a run-down frat house populated by slightly less lost boys, drunks, dope-heads, and even a few steady blue-collar workers, the guys that kept the bills paid. It was probably only one of them who actually had his name on the lease; the others just rented bedrooms or couch space from him, the skinny, long-haired, Irish carpenter dude from Boston who dealt the weed, or so it was rumored. One of the lost musta' quietly let it slip to me, the source, but the alleged dealer and I never got that close, so I can't honestly say. It made sense though—he was workin' things and to nobody's apparent disadvantage either, despite the fact that a few of us, maybe most of us, the outside outsiders who parked right in front, paid no rent at all, nothing. We shared weed, smokes, beers, jokes, gas, or maybe nothing at all because some of us were out-and-out parasite types, the kinds attracted to those less than selective social scenes. No, this was not Doris's father's country club crowd, and I would have hated for him to see me so low. Others of us had occasional bathroom privileges, *gratis*, while still others, usually newcomers, did not. It was sort of a central housing hub; think of a *Lord of the Flies* bungalow meets *Animal House*, only instead of off-beat, irregular college kids or routine prep school lads, it was bottom-feeding high school dropouts, jailbirds between bids. Instead of eccentric and comical characters, it was stupid people who might be dangerous—just my kinda' crowd. Yeah, I had bathroom privileges, but it was mostly for that girl that I was still there, rotating nights between there and my discreet country compound off Alligator Alley, both spent in the pristine comfort of the back seat of the trusty Newport Custom. Oh yeah, and by then I let Ron and Blaze, the dog and the man, Ringo, and the car payments go too, leaving them in the past along with Myron and his two, make that four, assholes, Linda's perfect nipples, and the Butch Cassidy scene, along with Doris, Angel, Susan, the army and navy store girl, J.M., his *hundts*, Sterling Pope, the middle-aged, flirty-frosty blond at the *outfit*, and everything and everyone else before them too. No looking back, no time for yesterday as this was hand-to-mouth survival mode again, scrap yard to scrap living, paycheck to Grady's to paycheck to gas station time, when priorities

whittled themselves down to a narrow and select few with me trying to hold on to life until something big happened, maybe even something really big that would shift currents significantly one way or another. That was as far ahead as could now be hoped for or seen.

Met this dude on the construction job, a dark-haired Texan, Mark, he said, Mark Johnson, with a thick *Buffalo Bill* mustache, smooth guy, a college man, easy-going, hard-working, serious and fun, but not too wild, not crazy wild, like so many others I ran with, or from, or to, or am, working the same gig, the laboring job, but as a carpenter, he too was looking to tend bar once the club opened. He had experience, was two or three years older than me, and was basically on the same trip as me. To my Yankee ears, Johnson sounded like a real Texan name, so it stuck. The owners, a Jewish family from Cleveland, home of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, owned and ran rock clubs at several other locations across the country, and this place was to be their next and latest, possibly even their greatest, the first in south Florida, and there we were, the young construction crew of dudes, ground floor, ready to share in some of that dark, cool, rock'n' roll magic. Again, the starting pay was already better than average—at least a buck an hour more than the minimum wage—and it was regular—a paycheck every Friday, when they would even cash it once you signed it over—so there were hopeful signs this might turn into the long-term gig I was looking for when I originally planned on heading down there. All I had to do to realize it was not fuck it up, survive until the doors opened when the real fun would start and the cash would start rockin' rollin' in, just like I imagined back in America's Healthiest City. There was even talk of them taking some of us along to the next location and the next, a steady crew of insiders, carpenters, bartenders, and who knows what else? This was good. I met the boss once, briefly, in passing—a young guy in his thirties, a fedora-wearing rock promoter type who seemed sharp, confident, and personable. No attitude, kinda' like the Long Beach Chemist boss. This got me psyched. There was another young dude, early twenties, a light-haired, athletic guy, looking like a pro ball player, baseball maybe, another southern boy but very clean-cut, definitely not out of any inbred swamp. We three clicked it up right away and kept each other lookin' good, productive, and out of harm's way. Not sure what his name was, but he too was definitely on the

same track as me and the Texan, so all our moves, from early morning coffee to late afternoon beers, fit just as you would expect of a tight team with one goal in mind with all able bodies heading in the same direction.

Johnson was between addresses too at this particular juncture, so we formed a two-car caravan at night and with them circled the wagons off Alligator Alley, my palatial outdoor spread, a clearing in the heavy growth of the tropical forest, he in his car and me in mine, parked in close tandem but facing opposite directions. This way, we could keep the inside windows cracked open for air and the outside doors locked, with windows sealed tight. Survival. That's how it went: showering on the job or at the *Lord of the Flies* frat house, sleeping in the parked car here or there, partying, boozing, working; the 24-Hour Game now focused almost exclusively on the local Ellie-Mae Clampet as the young Blanche Dubois, undeterred, despite being well into overtime on that project now by weeks, still and all; and, above all else, the relentless and steady deterioration, from the inside out, despite my valiant struggles to oppose and end the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, my soul steadily disappearing like a vampire's fading image in the medieval mirror; the thickening cloud once again gaining on me, its traction back and now again all but eclipsing the momentary hopeful glow of the Hallandale Beach sun.

Now serving, a plate of Ugly

With a steady, measured pressure on the gas pedal and my cohort of discontents behind and around me, the move was to slowly edge through the quiet and the darkness towards the parked car stationed right in front of and facing the shack. Giving it slight gas while riding the brakes until gentle contact was made, my front bumper to the rear bumper of the other car, and then accelerating just forcefully enough to push it slowly and as quietly as possible into the warped and rickety front porch stairway, which would then cause the entire crumbling foundation of the shack to shift a bit, letting them know it was either an earthquake or the games had begun, either way, it was an alarm. Now, I'm not sure how or why the outside outsiders were even in my car in the first place, or what the beef was, but as soon as the

rude contact was made, a kinda' b-bump... brrrr.. and push forward, my rear wheels began to grind and spin as the porch began to creak and shift, so I slid her into reverse then made the proverbial three-point turn outa' there, down the alley and into the street, headed towards the main boulevard with several inhabitants of the house, maybe as many guys as we had, including the Boston-Irish carpenter brandishing a hammer, come running out and into their car in hot pursuit after us. Now I was in *flight*—not a terror-driven flight, just a fun flight, an adrenaline-rush fun flight—but the boys inside my car wanted me to stop so we could all get out and rumble. Too late for that; I was in the flow now, like on that ill-fated beer run from the beach, speeding down the dark boulevard, blasting through red lights in a game of chicken like they weren't even there, daring them to follow, *let's see who gets hit first and how badly*, hitting fifty or sixty in a thirty-five or forty, light after light, my now terrified crew yelling "*stop!*" until finally, after three or four lights, *WHAMO!* A second flying vehicle cuts across the intersection from the cross direction at the same time, and, well, there we met, him smashing into my passenger-side rear quarter panel sending us into a fast but ultimately harmless three-sixty spin until gravity and friction slowed us down to a stop. *Ta-DA!!!* And what of the driver and passengers in the other car who slammed into us in this live-action game of bumper cars? I have no idea, but I am glad to report that nobody I saw was hurt. No scratches, no blood, no ambulances—nothing. Then, as soon as the spinning stopped, the FLPD was on us like five tons of white on a half-ounce of rice. They'd been chasing me for blocks by then, sirens blasting and lights flashing, and I was so charged up during the chase that I didn't even hear or see them, not that it would've made much difference if I had; I was going for broke, *getaway* or *die* style. It was all over within seconds of impact, and the bad guys, or guy, bad guy, me, was now out of road to run and in steel bracelets locked behind my back once more, the cloud had burst.

— At the FLPD motel, as they were booking me, a few blue heads began nodding in recognition again, so it occurred to me that the first two times, the name I used then was no longer good. That guy already didn't show up for two separate cases, so that was that. Aside from my fake ID, the only other ID I had was with my name, the actual one on my military card, which is what I showed them this time. One of the cops, one of the head noddors,

said to his partner, "*He has more names than the phone book.*" Slightly overstated but point made, something you might hear from Joe Friday. Anyway, I got the point: I was running out of road here too. That was the point. That much was clear. Who even knew what the charges were? But again, again, yes, yet again, they just let me out into the blazing, obnoxious morning sun, but this time under my actual name and with yet another crumpled up and thrown away document from the county with a date on it that I had no intention of keeping. But whatever, I knew I was done this time. That was, in effect, the lion's roar that morning. Florida was a wrap. That was a certainty. It was only a matter of figuring out how I'd get home, how I'd do it, and when exactly I'd leave (today, 3 p.m., 4 p.m.? Not tomorrow). It was the dead of northern winter, late January, and by what exactly did I mean by or think of as *home*? Now, without wheels again (they had the nerve to impound my reliable Newport Custom, loyal to the end), very little money, and no actual home to get to, exactly as it seemed at the end of the summer before last, outside the port authority in Times Square, and exactly as things stood when I first arrived at the airport in the Sunshine State, perfect in all its sad symmetry, and so clearly and obviously time once again to hit the road and roll.

A three day road trip: day one

— "*Gimme a ticket for an aeroplane - ain't got time for no fast train*" – The Letter, Wayne Carson (1967)

— The time to act was in the present, with none to lose. It was still quite early in the day, perhaps even before eight or nine. They needed the jail-cell space available for the next cage load, so everyone deemed releasable was gone, but the clock was ticking, and I intended to be on my way, rolling out of Dodge some kind of way before the end of the day *that* day, aiming for before sundown, like in the old westerns. Momentum was always key. If you want to get something done and you're already riding it, go with it. Tempered, measured, but sure, *festina lente*, like we say in the back-alleys of Broward County. And I rode it. I was definitely done here. Three strikes and I was calling myself out before someone with a badge and a gun

backed up by a man in black robes did, and then entirely on their terms. It was inevitable unless I made haste; like I told them back in Nimitz, the line only goes in one direction, like the RVC cop in the patrol car said, no mystery where it ends either, so no lion's roar was really needed to tell me it was just past time to head back to where I at least knew how to get around, even if it meant back to a cold, dark, and lonely Long Island flop-house again. *Cheers!*

First problem that had to be solved was finance. With only a few bucks in my pocket at the moment, like local bus fare and coffee money, the first stop would have to be the construction job where a paycheck was due me. For how many hours and in what exact amount I wasn't certain, but whatever it was or wasn't, it'd have to do. That was basically how I was getting home—now meaning back to New York. Thankfully, the check was waiting for me upon arrival, so after cashing it, said my *seeyalatas* to the crew, Mark, maybe the boss, and the other guy, but the amount, around sixty or seventy dollars, though correct, was hardly going to be enough for any plane ticket, not even enough for a slow and lazy, noisy Greyhound. I was short by a few dollars, so there was only one option I could think of to meet this urgent deadline, *outa' town by sundown*, and that involved a quick trip to the local, thrift shop where I'd hopefully score some clothes suitable for January in New York, gather them and whatever else I had floating around the vicinity, an alarm clock radio stashed somewhere, maybe some personal items, the magnet, my watch if I hadn't already hocked it, stuff them into a pillow case, and hit the road hobo-style, "*Trailers for sale or rent—rooms to let fifty cents.*" The first stop after the thrift shop would be I-95 at the intersection exit of, you guessed it, Hallandale Beach Boulevard by foot, and from there, head straight and non-stop to New York City, a mere twelve hundred or so mile sprint up north by thumb. It was likely just after the first or second short ride, up a few exits, or it might have been after walking a spell on the highway shoulder and arriving by hoof carrying my pillow case full of possessions slung over a shoulder at one of the next exits up, but whichever, distance had definitely been made, so I felt encouraged to be well beyond the first step of over a thousand-mile journey into the dead of a northern winter. Within a very short period of time after starting, maybe an hour or two at most, I was joined on the road by three more

merry travelers also hitching north: a party of two young chicks and, to complete the Norman Rockwell scene, their puppy.

Not much is crystal clear about the onset of this one-time event other than that it was still light out on the road when we identified ourselves as fellow vagabonds-by-thumb, a step below steerage-class travelers. They were headed to see a relative in one of the Virginias, and I north beyond that, so we decided to hitch together. Of course, and why not? I mean, there we were, just like that, as if the very universe itself decreed me as *chaperone* and they as designated companions. Yeah, the girls were young and cute, both probably younger than me, and I figured since I didn't drag them there, and although they were probably still late teenagers and one of them was cradling a small pup, maybe two or three months old, in her sweatshirt pouch sleeve, we could act as a team, hitching and accepting or rejecting rides together. All for one, one for all type of deal, so that's what we did, and to top it off with frosty, finger-lickin'-good icing? I was the guy.

Hitchin', as you can imagine and generally speaking, is neither a science nor an art, it's more a crapshoot that obviously becomes a lot more challenging as the odds of success decrease in proportion to the number of people involved. Three (and a hidden pup) were going to require the charity of a more select group of kind-hearted and available sojourners, and as is no surprise, truckers and semi-drivers make up a disproportionate share of that likely and friendly subset. One of those huge, 45-foot trailers with a sleeper cab picked us up after not too long. There was still some fading light, and he told us he was going as far north as Jacksonville, which was a helluva' score for the first ride together as a team, almost the end of the state, so in we climbed and grateful we were. The girls crept up into the open sleeper in the back while I took *shotgun*. It was a trip I'd long remember, as the view from every direction was hard to forget: the road from up there, the driver to my left, the terrain to my right, and my fantasy harem behind me. And the dude was straight up too, not anglin' for nothin', just being a Samaritan to a sympathetic party on the road and in need, so sincere thanks were due and received as his kindness and help were a real confidence booster, not to mention the distance we covered. Once we climbed down and got out, though, yeah, now it was dark, and the

psychology changes with nightfall, especially on the road alone and without any outside support. That applied to all three (or four) of us. Nobody wants to be standing on the highway's shoulder, definitely not on 95 with their thumb out, being blasted by the dark wind gusts issued by barreling semis or ignored by speeding autos and massive passenger buses (Kabbo: Volume I), almost swallowed whole into the depths of nocturnal alienation bordering on nihilistic despair. How does it feel to be nowhere and alone? "*Like a complete unknown?*" Exactly. Indeed it does, Mr. Dylan, sir. The quiet fact was, and then disclosed, that I still had a few bucks left from the check and the shopping trip and could afford to get a motel room with a bath and sneak them in, where we'd crash for the night and head back on the road in the morning sun. Well, as you might imagine, that went over][rather well with my companions, now the hero, so they waited patiently in a selected dark corner of the tight parking lot behind the first roadside motel we came to in walking distance from the exit where he dropped us off, where I quickly got busy checking in with the desk clerk, asking for a single room. By that, I specifically meant a room with a single bed. One. Not two, not two twins, not even two queens, but one, a single, solitary bed. One box spring, one bed frame, a single set of linen, two pillows, and one mattress. Get it? That was the plan, and exactly how I deliberately spelled it out.

So far, a happy story, right? Of course, given the circumstances, my intention though was to make it a really, really happy story. At least for me, for everybody else too, hopefully, that is, but my exclusive wishes were my only uncompromising commands. As soon as the hotel room door opened, I saw it was all wrong. Wrong and too late. Two beds, two fulls—exactly what I did not want. The girls were watching from close by as planned, in the parking lot corner shadows, so when they saw the light turn on quickly and quietly, they moved to join me there. It was supposed to be fast—one move, a straight line—see it and come. There was no point in raising the profile of the operation by going back to the clerk and trying to fix it; this was a major expense as it was, and included no plan to pay any extra for the three other souls on board. By now, with them about to cross the threshold, it was basically a done deal—two beds—so that was that. The two middle-class, hippy-esque, white girls were definitely old enough not to be considered runaways, and again, they joined me as much as I joined them. In fact, it

just played out that way; we were going along with events as they developed, same place, same time, a natural flow with no imposed intentionality at all beyond reacting to the moment and keeping things, expected and not, as smooth as possible and in keeping with the direction we were headed. Not that any of that mattered or even entered my thoughts anyway. It was January '80, when something like this type of adventure travel—road trips via thumb—remained woven into the fringe fabric of popular culture, as it had been for generations, at least since Kerouac and the Beats, so it wasn't a spectacularly odd event or even that big of a deal, a journey like this, yet it was still somewhat rare and usually interesting. They were cute, both of them, petite little things, just my style and age range, and the puppy? Maybe even cuter, about the size of a kid's football curled up in the thick, cotton sweatshirt lap pocket one of them wore, 'til once inside and the door shut when she took him out, all slobber, tail wagging, yelping and fur, so after ushering the three of them in quickly and quietly locked the *No Tell, Not Right Room, Motel* door.

The challenge on this *not-so-lonesome-any-more* traveler's hands now was getting the three, or if necessary, four of us into the same bed at the same time, the issue I was trying to resolve before it came up, an acquired 24-Hour Game practice, thinking ahead by a step or two, signing on the dotted line, forking over the twenty or so dollars in cash, then taking the keys. But that is all in the past now. Now I had to figure out and execute a Plan B, an adjustment plan. Thinking fast, the next best resource I could come up with was the bathroom, specifically the bathtub. The two lady sojourners seemed a bit apprehensive just about now, at least acting that way (what did they imagine a hitchhiking journey like this was going to entail?) as they were huddled together under the sheets of the far bed, the puppy between them while I was running the warm water, so they kinda' sensed what I was thinking. I wanted to play and was angling to entice them. While the tender-hearted travelers were practically clutching one another with exaggerated angst, me, the host of the party, was feeling decidedly left out. Plan B was to rearrange the sleeping room while the tub filled while only wearing a towel covering the vital zones. The TV, in particular, needed to be aimed towards where I could watch it from the wet warmth of the full tub, meaning the door would remain open and the interior bathroom mirrors properly

adjusted so I could see both them and the glowing tube in the same view, which also meant they could see me soaking leisurely in my birthday suit, hoping that might be an offer they couldn't refuse and so get them interested and involved somehow—maybe offer to *scrub my back? Bring me a cold beer, at least? Dry my back? Light my smoke? My fire? A shy smile? A girlish giggle? A subtle wink? Something? Anything?*

Sadly enough, that went about as well as plan A (renting a room with a single, solitary bed) did. They didn't budge, and in fact, when I eventually threw on a towel to come out and check on them, if anything, they huddled even tighter. Lucky puppy musta' been lovin' the cuddlin', but this dog was left out in the cold. Damn girls, I wondered, what's with the formalities? Whatever I tried, short of just jumping in there with them met with the same response, and by the time I pulled the plug out of the tub and put back on my boxers, I was out of patience. Patience was not a virtue or even useful for the game; in fact, if anything, it's a frustrating hindrance, *festina lente* as we say in the corridors of Freeport flophouses, sure, but know when to quit. I wasn't looking for another night of frustration; there'd been at least two before that, which was already too many, so I pulled the plug on them too and told them to leave. Yeah, the two girls and the puppy. Just go. Out into the night. No one rides for free was my take, and I didn't have to say it twice. The very notion of waiting another day or two, or even three, giving the situation time to mature and perhaps evolve towards my wishes, never occurred to me. Not for a second. It was all about the now and what I could get. That was my world, wherever I happened to be, now a freewheelin' drunken lizard-brain on the loose hitching up the interstate, which was why I was alone again back on 95N with my thumb stuck out in the breeze, regretting it even then, because as soon as I woke up and realized they weren't waiting outside, or anywhere else in the world for me, they were gone, probably forever, and as for me, I was probably forgotten. A stupid, selfish and cruel move I regret to this day.

Day two

All in all, the first day out was barely even a half day on the road, and despite my pitifully blunt performance the night before, it wasn't entirely a

failure. Now it was only going to be like one ride, and that would be into Georgia, over the state line, and another chunk of the road would be gone, while the mission remained above all else to get home as quickly as possible. The Broward County boys in blue might just be looking for me by now. Two or three missed court dates later, they might want to take me before a judge, even for petty crimes; enough of them together anyway. Taking them together as a single scene, the voice commanded: "*Get thee north, New York City north,*" and there was still enough money for another night, maybe two in a motel and sandwiches in between, so that meant get crackin', dust off that thumb, and face fixed forward at the oncoming while pacing backward up the highway in the sunny breeze of the northern Florida morning wind. The best practice I found was to project confident determination, no petitioning for pity, rather a sort of a deadpan poker face while trying for direct eye contact with each passing driver as they gave the hitchhiker a quick once over. That was your microsecond's chance to sell: "*I'm okay, no headaches, no danger; I just need a ride home.*" I had this, and the white pillowcase cargo sack was more than a prop; it added to the sincerity of the presented plight, suggesting this guy really needs a lift. After maybe an hour without a ride at most, the next guy to pick me up paid off for the delay. He was heading a few states north, to North Carolina, which would mean another hefty chunk behind me, so that was good. Another middle-aged white guy, a store manager of some kind, a white-collar job, a clean-cut looking dude, and since it was daylight and I wasn't going to have to be responsible for two young girls and a pup, I was as relaxed and confident about taking rides just as they were offered. This guy, though? Well, he turned out to be a strange one—in fact, strange enough with an ironic twist for the books.

The one item I needed but didn't have at the thrift shop was winter shoes. I was still wearing sneakers, not a January in New York wardrobe item at all, but the road was calling, loud and clear and the clock was ticking, so it was a quick, one-stop, shopping expedition where the pillowcase was filled with long pants, pullover sweatshirts, and a middle-weighted quilt jacket, looking decent enough, clean and fit, but as I said, no hard-soled leather shoes. The dude? My ride, we were talkin', of course, and by the end of South Carolina, he knows half my life story and where I'm heading, basically the

pressing details of my immediate plight minus the *on-the-run-from-the-cops* part, so he tells me he may have a swap deal for me to consider. Get this: he says he has a pair of light winter work boots in his trunk that just may fit me, and all he wants in return for them is my sneakers. That's all there was to it. A simple quid pro quo. Now, that would sure be convenient, I thought. If of all the shoe sizes available for him to have and swap, he'd have a pair that fit me? A seven-and-a-half medium, and the type of shoes I needed, being just about the only thing I needed but didn't have up 'til then? That would be remarkable. Sure enough, at the end of the trip, right on the shoulder before his exit he pulled over, we got out and the driver opened the trunk, where there they were, a cool-looking pair of brown leather half-boots covering just above the ankle and a perfect fit. They weren't new, but they were in fine shape and totally together. Not even any stains or stretches on the deerskin-colored leather, the laces, heels, soles, everything intact. The last thing I recall him saying to me as he pulled away with my sneakers was "*I bet you have nice, long, straight toes.*" Something like that. Yeah, fine, but as I was just about halfway home midway through day two and was now able to dress for a New York winter, the wardrobe, though sparse, was now complete and luck seemed to be with me again, a break in the cloud (in fact, oddly enough, it broke as soon as the cops cuffed me after the car chase). I hope he enjoyed my sneakers and whatever fantasy he had about them because I wore those perfectly fitting, second-hand work boot suckers all winter long, through the spring, and probably back into the county lockup again early that summer. But I get ahead of myself.

Day two and a half

The next ride came from a young sailor. Yeah, wouldn't you know it? A navy guy, dressed in civvies, or maybe he wasn't enlisted but rather a contractor of sorts, a guy who worked for a company the US Navy hired, but there was some connection, and he was going all the way through to Richmond, Virginia, closing in on the Mason-Dixon, so this was also a lucky score. There was still enough bread left for another night in a cheap motel, meaning once I made it to Richmond, or 95N through Richmond, I could call

it a night, grab a beer, and wrap it up indoors before heading out again for what looked to be my last day on the road the next morning. As me and this guy were traveling, another white-collar, late-20s, short-haired white dude, shooting the breeze, it came up that one of us had a joint and the other a half-pint of Southern Comfort, and one of us, probably me, suggested a trade, a little of this for a little of that, a proposal to which we both readily agreed, share and share alike. While I do not recall who had what or exactly who initiated the transaction, I do vividly remember his comment that "*Jews aren't usually alcoholics.*" Me? Yes. Meaning me. He was observing and diagnosing my prospective alcoholism status and rating it positive. Being called that for the first time, described that way, and knowing that he didn't mean it as an insult, it wasn't a provocation, it was simply an observation, an ironic one to him, still sounded absolutely way off base, i.e., nuts. I thought he was crazy, but for the sake of a comfortable ride and good manners before my host, I kept my thoughts to myself: *it was like half a fucking half-pint, maybe like four or five shots. What the fuck are you talking about? Alcoholic? Like Red Skelton? Dean Martin? Foster Brooks? Was I even drunk? Nah... Come on, dude, you know me for like five minutes.* Though it stuck in my head, we didn't get stuck on the topic; rather, we just kept partying while moving on to lighter topics like females, the navy, music, whatever, as he turned up the tunes and drove on. Easy ridin'. Life was getting back to handleable when before long it was dark and there was Richmond, all lit up below and easily visible from the interstate, and the closest bright lights were, in fact, neon-lit dollar-store trucker's motels. So when the time came and he pulled over, I thanked him for the ride and the trade (spare me any additional random diagnoses though, please) and hoofed it with the pillowcase slung over my shoulder like a lightweight sea bag to the nearest vacancy sign, checked myself in, washed up, and before closing the lights, finished whatever might have been left of the Southern Comfort, only to find Gideon's bible. Right? Please. Alcoholic, my pot-lovin' kosher ass. You never know what type of crazy shit you might hear while hitching up the interstate, slinging a pillowcase full of next to nothing across your shoulder.

Day three – Slip slidin' away to home plate

Next morning, I knew it had to be the last day on the road. There were no funds left for another hotel, but it was only like hours from New York now, not days, so there was hope, but there was no time to lose either, so there was nothing to do but, like Mr. Natural says, just *keep on truckin'*. Now, the air started to feel much cooler and as I reached farther north it seemed the rides were fewer and farther between, also shorter in duration, so the pressure was building. Long about mid-afternoon, standing roadside between rides with my thumb doing my talking for me, my luck seemed like it might be starting to officially run out again and drama was about to creep back up in its place, drama in the form of the long arm of the law. The scene is midway through Delaware, a tiny strip of 95, *enter stage right* a state trooper. Basically, he pulls up, gets out, and asks me what I think I'm doing up there on the interstate shoulder. *No malingering pedestrians allowed up there*, he warns, *not even by the exits and not for no reason*. My answer was as quick as it was politely straightforward, "*just trying to get home, sir*," to which he responded that he wasn't going to kick me off or take me in, book me for something and run a warrant search, not right now, but that he was going to circle back south after turning around at the next exit north, and if I was still there when he got back, it would be *time's up* and he'd have to take me in. *Fair enough?* was his vibe. (*Was there actually an alternative? Helicopter? Racehorse? Skateboard? Scotty! Beam me north?*) I wondered but didn't ask. What choice was there then? So, I thanked him, waited patiently for him to disappear up the highway, picked up my sack and stuck out my trusty thumb again, and prayed, almost as fervently as in that Lauderdale barroom bathroom stall for salvation, salvation this time in the form of a ride all the way out of state, or if possible and better still back home, home to New York City.

As Odin's minions would have it, that ride came barely minutes after my close encounter with Johnny Lawman of the Interstate. The next dude, who I remember not at all except he said he was heading all the way over the George Washington Bridge to Inwood, music to my ears, bull's-eye perfect, upper Manhattan; home base of the A train, from where all of the city was mine for only a fifty-cent fare. Cruising up the New Jersey Turnpike headed north to I80 and the bridge, maybe three and a half hours after the pickup, it's nightfall, and the growing glow of the great Metropolis's skyline is just

beginning to emerge from beyond the dark edge of the eastern horizon, visible from all the way as far as the gas fields and boatyards of Elizabeth, form at least thirty miles away, maybe more, pointed towers of light challenging and pushing back up against the awesome and overwhelming darkness of the endless galaxy beyond that far, stubbornly determined to disrupt its oppressive and exclusive dominance; the eternal striving spirit of Babel never learned its lesson, still putting up the good fight to exceed its own grasp. That's where I'm from; that's where I live, and so naturally, just seeing this and my withered strength begins returning, beginning with my heart, then moving up to my brain, out to my limbs, and then out into the whole fucking world. Watch me. I'm back. I'm home. Fuck the alligators, Li'l Generals and the police lockup, Odysseus got out just before the jaws snapped; Hercules unchained! Once I get that rush, once engorged in that energizing vibe I can handle anything: circus clowns, vicious dogs, strippers, lions, loneliness, car wrecks, fistfights, the cops, homelessness, anything. That's me; that's New York. You gotta' leave her to love her. I was back.

Once over the bridge and onto the concrete and asphalt turf of the promised land, I reached for my last big coins, two quarters, after spending the last nickels and dimes on the first pay phone in my line of sight with a 212, enough change left for only one call, to the Hickeys at a 718, asking for Jimmy, who then picked it up and cut me off by the middle of my second explanatory sentence with just two words of his own that answered my entire ordeal: "*Come here*," meaning Rockaway, meaning to his family's home. He didn't need to explain or clarify, and neither did I. The quarters were then quickly exchanged for a subway token, my entire fortune matching exactly the fare. Now, though I was literally penniless, the cold chill of the station felt so good, great even, so I ditched the pillowcase in the subway Salvation Army container, put on my thrift shop winter clothes and traded for shoes, and indulged my soul in the invigorating, comforting, late-January night air just off the Hudson, which felt exactly as it was supposed to feel until the train came and I sat myself down on the hard but much-welcomed bench, flat broke, in a warm and almost empty, graffiti-covered subway car, and didn't step out 'til practically the very last freezing stop on the opposite end of the A, the second to last stop more than an hour away,

to Rockaway Beach where I'd hike the last of the twelve hundred mile journey, less than a city block to the tenement street address of my navy friend who said: "*come here.*"

Once there, at the now-opened front door, I was let in from the cold and dark, tired, hungry, and in need, where the long-distance hitchhiker was warmly and quickly received: "*Jimmy's friend from the navy is here.*" There were no formalities—not one. All the Hickey brothers and sisters made room right away down there in that deeply set, heated basement where plenty of Christmas decorations and emptied gift boxes were still lying around or taped to the walls like it was an ordinary event when some number of them usually slept, eight, nine or ten or more, like it happened regularly when there was one or two more or fewer kids, or beds to make up, or mouths to feed, hardly mattered. It seemed they all had friends that stayed as guests, and everyone was fed. Trays of scrambled eggs, grilled potatoes, and buttered toast with jelly were passed down hand to hand from the kitchen along the stairs, plenty for everybody, and we tucked ourselves in. My arrival was perfectly timed like it was the Irish-Catholic New York Waltons' embrace of Jimmy's friend from the navy, and though I was not one of them by blood, I was sure no stranger either. Crazy Eugene even sacrificed a small animal marking my arrival—nuff said about that horrific gesture, but I was back. Good thing I jumped off that bridge. That and Jimmy's word were all the credibility necessary at that hour of need for the doors and hearts to open. This was it. I was home—the Big Apple, the Empire State—and so the Sunshine State chapter was now officially closed and fully behind me. Tomorrow, here by the beach, in the cold, desolate winter of the godforsaken Rockaways, but no longer alone, was a new day.

Chapter VI: *Rockaway wonderland*

After absorbing three more days and nights of selfless charity and warm-hearted smiles from my newly extended family, it was decided by the two former shipmates, Remus and Romulus, that we'd pack our bags (if a toothbrush counts as a bag), and with his good-as-gold girlfriend Mary who reminded me of Ingrid Bergman, that wholesome type, beautiful certainly, but not any kind of babe, she only had eyes for Jimmy, we'd make the big move out of the Hickey Ponderosa and head all the way up the block and across the boulevard to the flophouse on top of the second closest neighborhood barroom called *Howley's*. The first one, *Boggiano's*, another Ralph Kramden-style dartboard and pool-table gin mill, was on the near side of the main Rockaway thoroughfare. If we drank there, we wouldn't have to cross any streets to get back to Jimmy's parents' house should the need arise, meaning less of a chance of being hit by a car stumbling back home wasted to the gills after a long night of shots and beers. It was a toss-up until it turned out there were no vacancies there at present, but either way, we were breaking loose, so by default, the trio crossed that Rubicon away from home, Rockaway Beach Boulevard.

The place across the boulevard adjacent to the shuttered amusement park was named for Bill Howley, the owner and sometime proprietor, a local, white-haired retired cop, probably a sergeant, maybe a lieutenant, possibly even a captain from the neighborhood precinct house only a few streets up closer to the bridge (yeah, *that* bridge), so it was an easy call to make that this community was clan-tight if not actually outright related, distantly or not. Everybody seemed to be someone's cousin, nephew, brother, sister, in-law, out-law, or priest. Every name that was brought up in a conversation was usually followed by, "*Oh, yeah, that Peggy-Elizabeth? She's Tommy McMartin's niece*" or "*Him? Danny Mac? Played ball for Saint Johns? That's Joe Flannery's wife's kid brother,*" each one coulda' been a film extra in *On The Waterfront*. But the joint was his retirement nest egg, so he kept it up, the grim, three-story, dull-hued linoleum walk-up with the bar on the first

floor and two upper floors of tiny, claustrophobia-inducing rented rooms, about ten to fifteen of them evenly divided between floors, each one as depressing as the next, like a monk's cell but with a better bed and a cold-water sink. Down at one end of the hall, for the hot water was a single toilet and shower in a phone booth-sized bathroom without a sink for all the floor's residents to share. Cozy. Though it was kept clean, nearly spotless, it usually smelled awful, like stale vomit, urine, or ammonia. You just had to tolerate it. Maybe you'd be lucky and have a room with a window not wedged right up to the Playland rides like mine was, with the rickety planks of the rust-ridden roller coaster easily reachable at arm's length. From the outside, it was just as depressing: a dull-green and faded gray aluminum-sided corner property abutting directly onto the eastern border fence of the now-closed, always forlorn amusement park called, ironically enough, Rockaway Playland. Play? Play what? Play hooky? Play dead? Just looking at this junk heap of corroded and mangled steel, rotted wood, and broken-down trailers up close was a safety hazard; your eyes might break, and the wretched and creaky rides, half-covered by stained tarps and paint-chipped, salt-stained wood that no one bothered about, and the broken-down, weather-worn game booths decked out with bleached-out painted images of laughing clowns, playful monkeys, and faded balloons, so hideously abandoned and uncared for, might somehow cause a breakdown. It rubbed right off on you. The clowns were laughing at you just for being there, so you became trapped as part of the scene in some unidentifiable yet inescapable way, like falling backwards into a slow spinning whirl-pool. It all fits into the Rockaway ambience: a sad confluence of lost hope in the pit of a lonesome winter on a long-forgotten beach that no one but the working-class poor or the unemployed destitute ever visited. It was shot, polluted, dirty, and left to decay in the sand, the wind, and the salt, its population condemned to tread water in the communal struggle for a dignified existence, but unlike Long Beach, a ghetto with a much lower tax base that never enjoyed a heyday or a prime, today not even the ghosts of the *doughboys* would be caught dead there, so to speak. Casino gambling was coming here, too, of course, right away, any day now, and had been for decades, but aside from the routine rumors there was no tangible sign of any kind of revival looming on the horizon. All that said, for Jimmy, it was home, and that's where the heart is. There we took our three hearts, renting

two adjacent rooms on the second floor between the drunks, recently divorced, widows and widowers, and the aged recluses above the rough-edged gin mill, always bathed in shadows even at noon, decorated with framed and faded black-and-white photos and yellowing newspaper clippings glorifying the usual assortment of neighborhood notables: local high school athletes, pro hockey players, hero firemen, police, Christenings, obituaries, priests with awards, topped off with black and white 8 x 10s of thirties, forties, and fifties movie stars and pro athletes, Mickey Mantle, Dimaggio and Yogi Berra, but no Willie Mays, Hank Aaron or Jackie Robinson, forget that, not even Sandy Koufax or Hank Greenberg. At least it had a pool table, a jukebox, and a dart board, and the tap beers were cheap, but it stank of fresh mildew and stale vomit the instant you walked through the door and never subsided; you just tried to get used to it. It was from these hallowed halls that Remus and Romulus were about to begin tripping the night fantastic as overnight shift drivers for one of the town's least reputable outfits, Missy's Car Service, the Rockaway Playland of car services.

The other three or four *outfits*? Car services in the Rockaways were mostly run by independent owner-operators with newer cars and personalized company phone numbers painted brightly on the doors, the same last four digits or repeating patterns, and that's how they were known, like the "7777"s, or "0102"s. Decent operations, cars in shape, drivers presumably clean, sober, and reliable. Missy's though? Not quite. They had noisy, banged-up jalopies for the drunks, welfare recipients, and broken-down Disability cheats (drivers and clientele both), a market they captured by charging a half-buck or buck less per trip than the competition, so everything about it was a lot more random, held together by spit, paperclips and Tito's mechanical prowess. This *outfit* just happened to have its dispatcher's base in a dingy and compact two-room office sealed off from the cold by sheets of vinyl reinforcing the screened-in porch of another sizable, three-story shack, about two or three lots in from the beach, on the same narrow dead-end street as Howley's side-entrance, less than a block away. That second entrance/exit led not to the bar but to the shadowed lobby behind the bar, with a pay phone booth and stairwell up to the rented rooms, which made for a very convenient commute even in the deep freeze

of January. The street itself was more of a narrow asphalt alley than an actual road, lined on both sides with abandoned summer bungalows and massive, decaying two- and three-family homes, dead-ending at the sand under the boardwalk. The location made it a reasonably safe place to park vehicles and keep an eye on things at the base parking yard and repair shop just across from the office, where the company mechanic and part-owner, Tito, a classic 'grease-monkey' of few words, probably dreamed about engines and carburetors, a tattooed and trim, long-haired and swarthy cat in his thirties, always armed with iron tools and an air of "don't bother me," maintained the fleet. Everything felt compressed as if space was at a premium here by the beach, but as far as I could tell, nothing was.

The only folks that seemed to be around, especially in winter, were those who had little choice in the matter. They were grounded by circumstances, usually family ties too tough to tear away from or everyday inertia, and as for me? It was a ghetto, period, but with little choice aside from returning to Long Beach, penniless and without wheels, I needed to burrow in before working my way out. A ghetto, plain and simple. A white ghetto, at least in this section. Nice. A wonderland of grim bordering on despair. Anyway, keeping to form, the two newest drivers were parked just up the block, barely a hundred yards away at Bill's Howley's corner château, where Leonard, the nighttime dispatcher, or the Ma' Barker, chain-smoking, old lady boss who dispatched the day shift and was the other owner, Tito's mother-in-law, Missy's grandmother, could call that payphone and send someone from the bar upstairs to drag you out of bed if you meandered beyond tolerance and were late for your shift. Shift changes, around 6 p.m. were a rush hour; more fares in those two or three hours than in the nine or next ten. Convenient.

Accompanying us but, naturally, sleeping only in his room was Mary Mary, not-at-all contrary, from somewhere up in Breezy Point, a picture-perfect, sweet-faced and smiling, traditionally comported Irish-Catholic school girl, who coulda' easily passed for a pretty nun, now college age and in love with her smooth-talkin', sharp, blue-eyed, and barrel-chested Jimmy, Jimmy the black-belt in Aikido, the union tunnel builder and US navy reserve sailor, and the oldest son of "*Brother*", Jimmy's father, with the cryptic nickname.

Yeah, the family was well-known. The nickname was mentioned directly to me at one point, or when I'd surely hear it, that he, *Brother*, was the (unlikely) head honcho of the local Ku Klux Klan chapter. They may have liberalized in the Rockaways, gone *equal opportunity*, to allow for "papists," but after dropping that hand grenade into the discussion, whatever it may have been about before now went quiet, just those keywords echoing into the subsequent wordless abyss where it didn't seem to quite fit. Their neighborhood, Rockaway Beach, is right next to a well-known and notorious housing project, a high-crime, high-poverty, low-ranking place on the "strivers" scale on the whole. Actually, this was an island full of them. Public housing saturates the Rockaways from just east of the Silver Point Bridge entering Far Rockaway, across the channel from the upper-scale Nassau County's Five Towns, to just to the Broad Channel Bridge west (yes, *that* bridge), separating the working-class Rockaways from the more comfortable, upper-middle-class, white-collar Breezy Point west of 116th street. White boys that grow up that close to urban housing projects or even in them tend to adapt to that environment, meaning they are not especially shy of violence and are often competent at conducting it, including the willingness to take on and, when necessary, endure its inevitable c'onsequences. Sure, there's significant competition between black and white for resources and respect, and both teenagers and grownups have been known to go at it for less, I'm quite sure, even in the Rockaways, maybe, especially in the Rockaways, but when exactly did the KKK open up and start admitting Catholics, I wondered? I had no sectarian beefs at the time and wasn't looking to create or participate in any. They weren't my interest or my style unless confronted by the inevitable, not just then anyway and not just there where they could and have turned deadly in a quick hurry; this area of the city, the *butt-end*, as some called it using even less polite terms, was a far cry from Rockville Fucking Center and nowhere near the shady, mostly peaceful, all-white alleys of Fort Lauderdale, and these boys, Jimmy's pals, and neighbors, weren't Long Island high school frat-boys; they didn't need matching colored jackets or secret handshakes. They were way outa' my bush league when it came to throwing down. Violence, especially street violence, came comfortably to them, which was another easy call to make on first impression, which by itself was a standalone fact that needed adjusting. It was gonna take more than leaping

from a bridge and participating in the execution of a small rodent to get their attention, let alone respect. That much was clear. Otherwise, there was no sign of that kind of tension—a KKK thing. It seemed more like a black-and-white live-and-let-live vibe, but at a respectable distance. Everyone knew and accepted where the lines and boundaries were: Beach Channel Drive here, Eighty-sixth Street and the boulevard there, *this shopping center* here *but not that bar* there kind of boundary, and the like. So, I took it in stride and asked no questions. This wasn't an investigative journalism project for me; it was just my current *day-to-day* survival project, from a quarter to a dollar to a dime. But the word, the title, *Brother*, and its unspoken reference got through, said quietly with reverence, just above a whisper, and whatever the discussion may have been about leading to the name being dropped had moved on and the topic closed. In fact, I caught a glimpse of him once or twice during the three days spent inside his royal tenement castle and noted the impressive air, like a confidently at ease, beefy Irish Al Capone calmly asserting himself through life at his peak of power. Not a show-off either, I thought—well-groomed and clean-shaven with a powerful and secure stride, chest out with just a hint of a smile, like everything was easy for him because few, if any, ever challenged his will, and certainly not at all stressed by having that many mouths to feed all the time. Brother was a guy who drilled deep underground, through asphalt, concrete, rebar, and bricks, to blow up granite bedrock and make room for heavy machinery, plowing a tunnel beneath major rivers before lunch. He was broad-shouldered and thick-limbed, about thirty percent larger than his oldest son and, proportionally, potentially more fearsome. Not a guy you'd want opposing you in any serious way—another Jimmy D, or Harvey Lowenstein, a great friend but a terrible foe. Either way, thankfully, it was not my concern, and, despite being visibly white, I knew the KKK were no friends of the Israelites, so there was no reason to draw more attention to any of it by asking questions or commenting, and besides, *fuck all that anyway*, what did I care? I had my pal and his girl, a clean enough room and a thick enough mattress with a noisy but warm steam radiator to flop in, a full-sized bed with a low-wattage lamp on the night table, and a running sink for a cool twenty-five *piasters* a week, same as the Freeport flophouse, less than a usual single shift's take even after coffee and rolls and cakes and smokes (yeah, I picked them up again somewhere along the line), and soon I would

be rolling into an outdoor job with constant movement and a steady breeze to hustle that food, booze, and rent money four or five or even six nights a week. Those would be twelve-hour graveyard shifts, driving for the bottom of the Rockaway car-service food chain. *Hallelujah*. In this short-lived moment of newness and discovery, despite all that's been said about the hopelessness and gloom, the defeat and surrender to them that seemed so prevalent here in Rockaway *Village Ghetto Land*, the intrepid dark cloud plaguing me since Long Beach appeared to be passing again, moving along now, and so, in a very finite and limited sense, I felt almost free of it, replaced with what might be light at the end of that proverbial tunnel, but not the ones the Hickeys built; mine was imaginary, theirs was real, but no matter. *This might be all right*. Here I might be able to sustain myself long enough to somehow get things back to where they were before the night of the cloud—that terrible car crack-up outside the precinct house six months earlier.

By walking in with Jimmy, practically neighborhood royalty, and due to the regular turnover of sketchy riff-raff drivers, both of us got hired right away, the same day we made the big move up the block, my toothbrush in a cup above the sink. Now me, him, and the thirty-something, short-haired, flat-nosed, John Lennon-looking dispatcher who claimed to be a Vietnam vet, Leonard, who hated being called Lenny, were setting up our schedules so we could tag-team (and drag-race jalopies under the el) through the dead of night. Driving like racing maniacs along those tight two-lane curves under the elevated A train in the beat-up puke-green and urine-yellow painted sedans would be cool. These auctioned-off police radio cars, I would come to learn, naturally flew, with big engines, lotta' cylinders, and horsepower, always firing just right on Tito's precisely set and measured points, and better still? No one would likely notice or care about another dent or nick or two picked up along the way. Those faded white-lettered phone numbers painted on the door panels were the only visuals they cared about. These beasts, ugly and loud as they were, unlike the purple pizza purveyor, aside from the fact that they were well tuned and warm inside when it was a frozen dark outside, had no redeeming character at all, but as long as the heat and radio worked (otherwise, I don't drive, as I made known upfront, AM/FM radio, Leonard.), they were also going to have to serve as possible,

and hopefully, my mobile motel room. From six p.m. to six a.m., these dented and rusted but well-running sheets of steel, chrome, glass, plastic, and rubber were definitely now my designated 24-Hour Game machines. Though my host, guide, and ambassador knew my plans, of which he got steady updates, I discreetly kept them hidden from Leonard, who hated to be called Lenny. That, his humorless expression, accentuated by the thin lips beneath his flat nose, and his Sargent Pepper mustache were his most distinctive features appearance-wise. All that philandering would, of course, go down when not catering to Missy's main business, the transportation needs of the welfare and housing projects, barroom drunks and working-class poor clientele. The fares were called into the base and from there dispatched out to the closest available driver, who kept the base updated from pickup to drop-off as well as keeping a written log of every call and charge for the shift. When cashing out at the end of the shift, daybreak the next morning, the driver had to reconcile with the dispatcher and hand over half the total fare, keeping his half plus tips, and splitting the cost of the fuel 50/50. Folks always needed to go where they needed to be, whatever the hour, and that was the driver's job—get them there. So in my world, as long as it got done and the right money was handed over for splitting at shift end, the rest of the time, with wheels and on my own, was mine, loose in the Rockaways and on the prowl. That meant time and gas would be spent chasing thrills in the quiet and cold darkness, spiced with just enough risk and danger to liven up valet work. Underneath and driving it mercilessly forward was the constant craving and at times desperate search for a moment or two of closeness of the human kind, even from strangers, offering its paper-thin and transitory warmth, the only kind they'd likely ever share. I'll hunt for and grab that. Yes, indeed, even that. You know what they say about beggars and choosers.

24-Hour Game, Rockaway style

Now the game would be played on an entirely different field, one that played heavily in my favor: a car with an open front seat for passengers as well as a set of vacant back seats, whereupon pickup, they were free to choose whichever was their preference. That meant that if I pulled up responding to

a call and the waiting passenger (we're talking about single females here) took a quick look inside just to check things out before climbing in, if she chose the front seat, the passenger seat next to me? The light was green, and the clock would start ticking. Back seat meant I'd have to try a bit harder or not at all, depending on their initiatives or responses, but the back seat was always a "yellow" or possibly even a red light by default unless acted upon otherwise by the passenger and an adjustment was made. For example, she gave me her number, which seldom happens, so it was a clear, bright, flashing green, so I focused on the greenlight opportunities, of which there were plenty, especially among the darker-skinned clientele, the black ladies, now my hands-down or hands-on favorites.

First score was Gloria from Beach 37th and Seagirt, and it must have been a green light, because black Gloria and white Rob became items rather quickly, right off the bat, in fact. It's not certain, but she was probably picked up along with her shopping carts and arms full of groceries from one of the local supermarkets, which, of course, I helped unpack from the back seat and trunk and even offered to help carry them upstairs once we got outside her building. Obviously, there was a tip incentive, so this didn't seem out of line or pushy at all. Actually, except for the location, the housing projects, it was pretty common practice to give ladies with arms full of grocery bags that type of service, and the only unusual aspect was that my exact offer was to help bring the groceries up to her apartment, which was deep inside and very high up in the notorious high-rises, and it was now the dark of night when the marauding ghosts and goblins come out and white-folk are few and far between. Outside of cops, other government workers and tradesmen, not many white boys were to be counted in that neck of the woods after sundown, nor even many during daylight. White dudes looking to buy weed or whatever met their connections at the local bodegas across Seagirt or at the KFC parking lot or drove by, seldom if ever crossing the threshold into anyone's actual living quarters or even the property between the buildings with the yards, benches and basketball courts. But this was a different mission entirely and called for a whole 'nother risk assessment formula and strategizing process altogether, one that would freeze the clock before the 24-Hour bell rang and not find me alone and without, once again,

on the hollow side of forever.

The thing is, once she saw the young, white-guy driver was serious and willing to play on her turf, the trim, curvy, and perky lady in her late twenties to perhaps early thirties fell for me like the proverbial smooth stone in soft mud. That is to say, we were upstairs and in her bed either that night, probably even that morning after the shift ended, or at most the next day. I'm not sure; it doesn't matter, but it was definitely inside 24, quick and satisfying. A home run. That mattered. Sure, I was a little stressed heading up there. I might not be so welcome and the housing project elevators and hallways reminded me of the construction materials and layout of some of the county jails I've had occasion to visit, but I took the white man's burden chip off my shoulder and soldiered on anyway. Nature's stubborn imperative was calling. Here was a port for my storm, and I was determined to dock, come hell or high water, nosy neighbors or protective kin; I had not come that far to be turned around by anybody, thus I bolstered myself. Nobody's business but mine and hers. That kind of commitment was needed, and I had it. She was warm and loving too, and I still remember details that will remain where they belong, to myself, but I will say publicly that it is very likely she was my first black lady, that is. When people ask if I've ever slept with a black woman and if so, how many? My standard answer is always the same: yes and not enough. This went on more than once, maybe even several times over as many weeks. The only phone number available for me to use was the bar payphone in the lobby, available for the convenience of all the royal château's residents, guests, and employees. Whoever happened to pick it up just might give the message to whomever it might happen to be for and that's where she called. She'd call and ask for me or leave a message, and I would get it later that day or the next, passing through the bar on the way to the back and upstairs, usually by Bill Howley himself, who stopped me and, with a slightly conspiratorial nod, advised me that, "*Gloria called.*" It was the way he said it. The conspiracy was that he guessed she was black, a lifelong resident, and a local cop, so not a complicated puzzle for him to unravel. This part of the beach was pretty much a no-go zone for the colored folks, at least so far as overnight guests in the château, so bringing her there was not in the cards, but I thanked him and, in response to his skeptical glance, informed him that she was "from

the south" as a casually dismissive attempt to explain her voice and accent over the phone. Yeah, Alabama, south of Queens, okay? Now, we both knew, but it was cool; he may have been there and done that a little himself during his law enforcement heyday; *just leave it outside. Okay?* Got it. Not here. A Jew in their midst was enough for them to tolerate in these hallowed mick-Irish halls, but clearly, there were limits, and it was not worth finding out just how near or far they were right now, so we kept it to her place, whose own particular drama was yet to manifest.

No surprise, there were limits at her place too. She was a mom with small kids, no idea how many, but they and her brothers or cousins, among a few unidentified others, *in-and-out*, seemed to live there too. It was a large apartment, bright too, ten or more stories high up in the seaside sky with a great view of the outside walls of the other housing project high-rises, with at least two or three bedrooms, a big living room, and a kitchen, usually busy with some kind of activity, and there I was, a *white boy* in the morning after the shift, retiring into the mother's bedroom with her. Eventually, after the novelty of my special guest appearance wore down, it became clear that not everyone was as thrilled with my presence as Gloria was. It went okay, no interference, that is, the first couple times, but not long after, and I guess, probably also 'cause I wasn't kicking in any rent money or bearing any gifts either, my invitation wore thin and the word was delivered: someone, it wasn't clear exactly who, and it didn't really matter, but someone inside was fixin' to throw me somewhere outside through the wide and high-up living room window, and this message was a quiet and generous but not required heads up. It was said in exaggerated jest on my way out one time, but I got the not-so-subtle hint and decided it'd be my last visit. There was no reason to take the 24-Hour Game that far; it had come far enough for this round as it was, and there were quite a few more lonely ladies out there for this midnight rider to draw from, so I bid Gloria and her roommates, kids, and cousins *adieu* and headed back to Howley's with a notch of another color on my belt and as a bonus, my scalp still intact.

Back at the homestead flophouse bedroom, with the shade now drawn over the lightless small window jammed right up along the roller-coaster fence inches from the silent, decaying planks and rickety rails, and amid the

cheap, thrift-shop pressed wood furniture, the squeaky bed, sink, mirror and lamp, it was time to get to sleep, at least before noon. Vampire life. There was another shift scheduled for that night, 6 p.m. sharp, when the game would be back on and there were streets to prowls.

Routine

Here at the château where Jimmy and Mary settled in, shackled up comfortably next door, we'd usually meet up at dawn after work (Jimmy, not Mary) for a few nightcaps before heading up to crash behind our respective closed doors. He drank this crazy stuff by the half pint: blackberry brandy, sweet like cough medicine; you could gag if you tried to guzzle it, but that was his thing. Beer was my regular—the popular cheap stuff, or tap, or, if I felt fancy, an import like Heineken, Löwenbräu, or Becks. Truth be told, I liked to drink, period, and swallow liquids, so with beer boozing, one could really kick back, consume and relax, like all night, bottle after bottle after bottle. A lot. How much of that blackberry crap could anybody drink before they died from sugar shock in a diabetic coma? Don't get me wrong, I'm no liquor snob; I'd drink anything if it had enough alcohol in it, you see, but one can really do some heavy imbibing when it comes to booze from beer, so it was a perfect match. Slug those suds down by the quart. Seriously, dainty little pints or half pints? Not gonna work for me, whatever the proof. Just forget it. I'll do shots, of course, but really only to chase them down with ale, carbonation, bight and more ale. Despite our beverage differences, we got on at night, racing stock car style through the cold and the dark, down the under curve beneath the EI in the frigid air, dangerously close to each other as we angled at high speed to pass one another on the tight turns at forty, or even fifty, maybe faster, crazy speeds between the concrete pylons supporting the trains, in such narrow, unyielding spaces, actually scraping the body panels together in the wind. Since they were former cop cars, they already had multi-channel radios installed when Tito won the bids, enabling us to keep up on one another's locations while chasing fares, covering for each other when necessary, dozing at times, and me, of course, always busy with my game and providing updates: "[car] *Seven to Nine, closing in on Beach 47, the honey blond with the major set, back in twenty, please*

stand by and cover." "Roger that. You loathsome beast." The constant attention to the game, of course, was only possible because I was single, no steady girl, a free-roaming agent without attachments, obligations, or boundaries, which was fine with me, generally speaking, as long as I was regularly getting some, even if it took longer than the 24. But Mary? Well, she had a plan for that, and the plan was for her to fix me up with a girlfriend of hers whom she knew from up in Breezy, a Jewish girl. If I agreed, it could be serious, like they were. Okay, cool, so I quickly but casually said, "Yeah, sure, why not?" No coaching was needed, inspired by Jimmy's brotherly assurance when he slyly whispered the "*chick will be easy for you to rap to.*" So, Mary went ahead and set up a double date for us. The plan was for the four of us to take in a flick together and maybe go out after for drinks or a snack at the big diner on 116th—something routine. We'd be acting like normal people for a few hours, and it was a good bet that with that type of proper incentive and support, it could be pulled off for just about that long, as I was still able to fake it for a limited spell. That date, surprisingly enough, turned out to be one for the books—nothing cataclysmic, no intrusions into uncharted territory, no threats of defenestration—but not a forgotten installment either.

While on the subject of brief but memorable installments for the books and to give a further background into my approach towards the relationship with the Hickeys of Rockaway, we need to examine more carefully the extent and nature of my ever-ripening madness. At just twenty, as mentioned earlier, escaping into "the city" meant getting lost between the congested folds of traffic, pedestrians, and skyscrapers, where I'd let loose with abandon to indulge my darkest fantasies, among them, stickup man. The fact that I had not yet found a way to arm myself with a hand-held or otherwise discrete firepower mattered not. It would come when the time was right, but for now, it was time for practice. The skill or knack for gaining a target's confidence quickly enough and long enough for them to let down their guards had been developed over the course of my one-punch knockout exercises and the 24-Hour Game: get'm close, get'm relaxed, get'm alone, and get'm *POW!* Whatever *pow* happened to fit. In this case, my target would be a suit-and-tie businessman-type selected from a pool of boozers in quiet, upscale Manhattan watering holes where I'd dress to fit in

and make my presence felt at the bar via casual conversation with prospective targets. There'd be plenty of loosened-up boozers with cash, jewelry, and other fine and takeable items to spare all over these joints, but all I needed was one. Sizing them up through observation and dialogue, who was easy? All that was needed was the right one to strike up a conversation with, just two guys drinking and schmoozing over Wild Turkey and Michelob until I could gain enough of the mark's interest and confidence to lure him alone somewhere outside and away from interference and witnesses. Maybe I'd offer to share some weed or provide access to available females for him to appraise, step into an alley outside the joint, and then, suddenly, *whammo*—I'm *Stickup Man*! Take his money, wallet, and watch, and best yet, this would be accomplished bloodlessly and without unnecessary violence per se via the trusty hand-held, a pistol as a visual accompanied by concise verbal instructions delivered with the Sue Andrews (Kabbo: Volume I) style of hushed urgency that signaled sincerity; something simple and clear like "*Wallet. Now!*" would suffice, then after taking the loot, leave the former possessor face down in the alley, warned to stay down to stay alive but otherwise unharmed, merely shaken and only lighter by the weight of his surrendered easy-come easy-go valuables.

These exercises were both everyday amusements and occasional rushes as well as career preparations, so naturally, they involved a lot of booze, both for the added liquid courage it provides and the release it offers from ordinary day-to-day cares, like getting killed, committing murder, or being locked up until forever on death row. After a few quick cold ones, I could be anyone I wanted to be. I grew six inches, put on forty pounds of solid muscle, and was fearless and strong, like Brother or my hero, the iconic Chicago gangster from Brooklyn with three long, ugly scars down his left cheek. Obsessed with and inspired by Al Capone and having read at least one thoroughly researched biography, I fancied myself the charismatic leader of a notorious stickup gang, or some type of hybrid trucking company-criminal gang manned by loyal acolytes with the right talents and determination to affect an assortment of high-risk, high-return enterprises created for and led by me. It was an intuitive understanding that led me to believe that the only way this could be successfully carried off was by

earning their respect, and the best way to do that was to impress them with just the right combination of daring, cold-heartedness and generosity.

Just the summer before, while still in Long Beach, on one of my unplanned visits to the Rockaways, all this fantasy and imagined daring concluded one hideously bright morning with waking in the front seat of an abandoned shell of a stripped-down truck with a smashed windshield and torn seat covers rotting away in a closed for business junkyard. It was just after dawn when I found myself so inelegantly situated, dry-mouthed, head-pounding, and nauseated, having no idea where I even was. Still in the city? Back in Long Beach? Rockaway? I must have subways there late from the city after concluding that there'd been enough practice for one night and that, just about out of cash and the cover of night, the session was over. Climbing out of the abandoned cab and into the brutal sun, I saw the company sign on the yard's trailer office door, Rockaway Salvage or something, and just beyond was Beach Channel Drive and the bay, so yes, I made it to Rockaway, probably looking to rustle up my posse and wreak some havoc on the citizenry or just find a place to crash that was not home. Thankfully, that was as far as I made it to my goal, stumbling into that yard and climbing into the truck cab to get some sleep after failing to locate the Hickeys in my drunken meandering malaise. It's for certain, though, that no matter how stylishly I may have been dressed, now ruffled, torn a bit, and stained, with sand in my ears again and tar on my new shoes and on my hands, showing up like this unannounced and in the middle of the night, they were not going to see me as any kind of future crime lord in the style of Al Capone. But still, I gave myself points for trying to impress them, though it's unclear just exactly how. No stickup (without a weapon of any kind?) was attempted, none that can be recalled, and rather than continuing my quest to find them this morning and try to press the point, I was the guy instead, badly hung over and moderately anxious (what the fuck did I do?) and the aspiring stickup man headed back to his seaside hideout to lick his wounds until the next time he'd be ready to roll the dice into oblivion like that.

The date

It was one of those surprise turns of events. She was cute enough—think Talia Shire—I not quite ordinary looking, definitely not the type I would follow with my eyes for very long or chase down the block to give flowers, as I occasionally did with others during my hound dogging heyday, but she was female, she was Jewish, and again, she wasn't bad looking. The type that goes for or flaunts sexy doesn't usually excite me. I don't need the extra added touches of flash, big hair, long nails, high heels, fishnets, and short-short skirts. I prefer understated Maryanne to over-the-top Ginger, even when they appear plain at first glance. The hot stuff is there. We already know that. Everyone knows that. There's no need to press those points, so to speak; it's true, sometimes less is more. She was okay, but again, as I said, not at all a five-star phenomenon, and in that way, kind of like her friend, Mary, an understated and petite Jewish brunette with pale, white skin and a soft, shy smile, and Jimmy was right; yeah, I could rap to her, a man of the world, that's me, have thumb will travel, I was the guy. The four of us sat comfortably, boy-girl-boy-girl in the cushioned cool of the dark theater, and about those shared armrests between us: Well, that's where the action started, almost as soon as the lights went out and the film began, when everything ignited immediately at first contact. It was instantly five-star electric, *whammo!* A perfect fit, even with the subtlest brush of forearm to forearm, bare flesh, and heat, that intangible fire that races through you all the way and penetrates right to the core, that unexplainable chemistry that lights up the world and keeps it spinning despite all the ever-present and interminable forces arrayed against it. So, of course, even though the first contact was casual, unplanned, and even happenstantial, what followed certainly was not. By the time the film was over, we were all over each other, kissin' like frantic teenage fools in sudden love, deep, endless kisses, my head swimming in lust and desire, interlocking hands, fingertips pressed tightly into palms and skin, stroking her arms, neck and hair like she was life itself, so now in this moment, she was everything, and I was hooked that fast, that easy. It happens with kissing. When it's right, there is nothing to compare it with—not drugs, not booze, not even orgasm. It's a complete experience unto itself and brings the partners into a oneness that obscures all sense of space and time. Only the kiss exists. That's how it felt to me, and we shared it—that moment, the forgotten film—and then, when it was all over—that night and the double date—I floated back to

Château Howely. The world had changed, suddenly and unexpectedly, a new and much brighter place had emerged where the Rockaways weren't so god awful ugly, depressing, and cold anymore. Tonight the painted clowns laughed with me; there was a girl here, beating back the dark clouds, and life was yet again worth living. Or so it felt.

There is probably nothing more profound and personally disappointing than the ones that flow from these types of letdowns and body blows. Not once, not twice, not three times either; too many times to count, too painful to recall, over and over, about once every two or three years, but they leave their marks on the psyche, the soul, and the heart anyway, so they never really go away; instead, they get layered over one after the other like the rings of a tree stump. Rejection. And not just any type of everyday rejection: the girl that won't give you her number, or won't return your call or gives you the wrong one; the job you didn't get; the game you didn't win; life's ordinary fare, nothing; you go along to get along, take it on the chin, and keep on truckin'; so banal they barely deserve mention, but these are special rejections, rejections by those with whom one perceives a connection whose meaning both clarifies and transcends everyday experience, that mystical, magic-moment of sublime self-forgetting turned to ash or mirage, leaving me utterly dumbfounded, hurt and again, as always, alone. She didn't want to see me again. What? This was my b'shert, or at least a solid, living, breathing, warm, and present candidate who don't come along very often but when they do, you know it. My "b'shert," the one HaShem intended, the yin to my yang. All the preliminary and vital signs were there, at least as many as were needed to explore further, but aborted? Cut off just out of the gate and after such a promising start? What was this, a cruel joke? Hadn't there been enough? Huh? I got the word and could hardly believe it. *You gota' be kidding. You really gota' be kidding me. Wait, you're not??? Smacked cold in the face after all that raging fire? You gota' be. You just gota' be. One date and one date only?* But they weren't. It was a fact. An anvil came crashing down on my head like in the cartoons. Daffy Duck opens the surprise gift-wrapped birthday present to find an exploding bomb. KaBOOM!!! His got his fool head blown right off, and in its place is a smoking stump holding a shattered box. The girl told Marry, Mary told Jimmy, and Jimmy told me—no explanation either, nothing to work with;

she just wasn't interested; there was no way to push back, perhaps persuade, maybe even somehow find a way to fulfill the sudden promise I believed was shared so intensely in that cozy, dark cavern among the burning kisses and supportive friends. But it didn't happen. It was a one and done, over, past, forget it, chalk it up, time to move on, so it was back heavy hearted, confidence bruised, b'shert my friend's Irish ass, back to the 24-Hour Game and my hollow, desperate nighttime prowling for something or someone even remotely resembling what appeared to arrive so naturally just a night or two before by way of a couple of good, close, and thoughtful friends. Mirages, like Sherry (Kabbo: Volume I) before her and too many after her, plague me. If anything supernatural was at play here, it was the trickster god, the faded clowns, laughing at me again from behind the stubborn clouds. I got it. The joke was on me. Ha! Ha! Ha! B'shert my motherfucken' Jew ass.

To the last stop

Between drag races, hunting expeditions, tips and stiffies, hits and misses, and morning blackberry brandy drunkenness with Hickey, time was otherwise dragging and heading nowhere. One of the bleaker lowlights was the regular Edward Hopper late-night, early morning pit-stop at the 24-hour food concession just in front of Playland on the boulevard, specializing in taste-free boiled hotdogs, pasty rolls, oily butter, fresh donuts, and metallic-tasting coffee from uncleaned urns; obscenely lit, deliberately ugly, depressingly vacant, drenched brightly in offensive white light, accentuating its emptiness and the forlorn employees who worked graveyard at the counter; the fares, the frights, the scores, the losses—none of it in any way appealing, and most of it downright repellent. Of course, Howley had grown kids our age; two of them were daughters; both were cute; one was more Irish-looking than the other; both were lovely and humble, sweet but not condescending, and they cleaned the rooms, so there was steady contact with the softer side of purgatory. Now, I was in no position to even try to approach them, not overtly, at least, and not because of their dad. He seemed to get a kick out of me being there, this struggling *fish outa' wauta'*, as they described me more than once, so it wasn't that; it was more that I

was in no position to, period, and I knew it, and that hurt too. I was better than this but was unable to show them how; after all, no one put me there; I put myself there, so there was no one to blame, meaning I had nothing to offer them. Everyone there knew I was that fish out of Long Island water—a young Jewish guy from a professional background that Brother's kid knew from the navy. After that, I was on my own, where not only was the fit poor but we all knew it, and the feeling was mutual. Somehow, I re-acquired a classic black leather car jacket, like an outdoor blazer, with a red satin lining, that had been salvaged from my belongings stashed somewhere before the great Florida flood. It was still pretty new when I grabbed it, and then proceeded to let it get drenched, soaked, shriveled, and ruined with sea-salt stains in the rain and snow, but I wore it anyway. For Missy, it fit, so there was no love coming from me either. It was like being kicked out of the soft suburbs and banished here to purgatory, a waiting room for a frozen Hell. That kind of happy-go-lucky, fun place.

One deep-dark and frozen predawn, maybe 4 or 5 a.m., I'm cruising to pick up a fare, heading down one of the very dark, very narrow side streets off one of the very dark and very narrow longer but no wider numbered streets that end where the boardwalk begins, tightly threading virtual dead ends except for the occasional intersecting alley streets like the one I happened to be searching for the address on, narrow as hell with only inches between my taxi and the cars parked bumper to bumper on either side in front of dark bungalows crowded on top of each other. Suddenly, from out of the pitch black shadow just behind me, between tightly packed old cars, comes this enraged denizen storming towards my driver's side car window, glaring at me, frothing at the mouth, and slamming his fist down hard, full force, using it as a hammer to pound on the trunk, then full fist on the window glass and hood. *Thump! Thump! Bang!* We're talkin' *night of the living dead* here, but the young man looked less undead than he did a habitual beachside brawler. Whatever the case, the unexpected rush of menace coming at me out of the otherwise ghostly quiet night came as a complete surprise, and not knowing who, what, why, or whatever it was, I stepped on the gas to roll away, but my quick escape was hindered by the narrowness of the road and the ice, which kept me from stepping on it hard. The raging guy's in hot pursuit, so I keep cruising, coasting just fast enough or less to

keep him off me, with him still pounding away at the trunk hood, the rear windshield, a door, whatever he can reach trying to get at me while I'm rolling as fast as I can without crashing Oldsmobile 88-style and being forced into a stop that way or worse. As soon as we reach the boulevard less than a hundred yards away, I step on it straight to the front entrance double doors of the luckily close-by police station only a block or two away now and drive right up on the sidewalk where I jump out, taxi still running, and bolt inside. The enraged maniac remained right behind me, less than five seconds from impact when I burst into the police station lobby only steps ahead of the *night of the living dead* guy, until he was finally slowed by a couple of the handy gendarmes who grabbed him, stopping him in his menacing tracks. Now I saw him, and guess what? He's another barroom brute, a total stranger shooting me death rays in the frozen dark of night. *Wunderbar!* Anyway, I'm like to the cops: "*No idea. This crazy guy jumped out of nowhere, slamming on the car, chasing me for blocks, scarin' the piss outa' me...*" and then, like, "*Ok, here we are; handle this for me, will ya' fellas?*" They didn't need me; there were no charges to press as far as I was concerned or any other reasons to stick around, so within minutes I walked back out unscathed except for my anxiety level, which had elevated to new heights. He remained, but it was over for me, so I went back to pick up the fare. Maybe it'd be a chick, a nurse showing up for an early shift, maybe a single waitress who just had a bitter argument with her boyfriend because she caught him cheating, or perhaps a party lady just looking for some fun; after all the game was still on, nothing interfered with that, and maybe she'd even choose the front seat. In general, though, think of it as an average night. There was no civil unrest or known bad business or personal conflicts for me here, yet this had pretty much become the style and tone of my routine nightlife in Rockaway, a nightmare within a bad dream on the fringe of an actual world.

While the Hickey family thought well of me, Jimmy's pals were noticeably less impressed. One night, during a Missy's Car Service shift, a customer left several full bags of groceries in the back of the car. By the time I discovered them and no one called them in, I decided to make use of them by delivering them to the Hickey house, where whoever opened the door, probably the mom, looked surprised by the gift horse but not in its mouth.

All I said was "*here*" as I extended them forward, and the bags were accepted, which for me served as a gesture of reciprocation and *thanks*. No one ever called about them later either, so there the event lies forever in the land of the mysterious and unknown, holding its peace. As far as his buddies, though, those that I met, there was no official gang, fraternity, or formal association outside the loosely affiliated clusters apparent to me, just neighborhood guys that grew up together in that environment and adapted similarly, leather-wearing tough young guys with classic Irish and Italian names, Mickey Feeney, Anthony Mangano, and Paddy Mac, and I mean that respectfully. None appeared to be bluffing about anything, ready to go for broke at the drop of a hat. To me, they seemed both brutal and confidently relaxed about it, dropping occasional anecdotes about carloads of guys heading across the bridge to Broad Channel where disputes with nearby competitors would be settled one way or the other with baseball bats, tire irons, and fists. To my thinking, if I were to ever even contemplate using a baseball bat on an opponent, that would be the equivalent of deciding to kill him, murder, and therefore, a weapon like a firearm would be a lot more efficient. A bat means getting really close and really savage, caving in the back of a skull or face. As I said, it may be effective but definitely brutal, whereas I preferred the reverse: definitely effective and maybe brutal. By virtue of my association, they gave me the benefit of the doubt, but not for too long. A smaller guy, one of their crew, a blond-haired little German-Irish mutt just my size, suddenly challenged me on a daytime street corner just outside Howley's to box right then and there. Somehow, I already had the impression he was another PAL star or Golden Glover, which was instantly confirmed by his stance and willingness to whoop my ass just to test me—no gloves, no timers, no bell—so I cautiously and diplomatically proposed a delay, something about needing a bit more training before climbing into the ring with him, which was grudgingly granted, his point already made: Jimmy's friend from the Navy wasn't one of them; *fish outa' wauta'*, and let there be no confusion about that. No one was very impressed with that kind of quick-thinking diplomacy *down in Jungland* either, so I lost more ground. On the other hand, according to one of the ringleaders (Feeney, I believe), because of Missy, I was also earning a reputation for being a dependable "wheel man" who could really *deal with the wheel*, as they phrased it, so with that, I saw a way into their

circle where I could play the daring cat that delivers them to their next baseball bat conference in another part of the borough, but that idea didn't actually thrill me, a lotta' risk for only a little reward, maybe none at all, so though I appreciated the impulse to include me, I didn't find it very compelling, being more interested in getting laid than getting beaten into a coma, or straight to death, or imprisoned for life trying to impress these dead-end boy roughnecks and feral neighborhood menagerie. Unlike my host, they just weren't all that impressive or important. As he passes us, I up swipe the brim of his cap, sending it flying about five to ten feet into the air, a good, well-timed solid slap, just like Carol's out west (Kabbo: Volume I), only with a man's force, just the brim off the fingertips exactly as intended, like Ronnie's glasses, not to injure but to provoke and humiliate him and so impress my host and maybe make up for the lost ground in the street-corner boxing ring challenge. The guy did nothing. He wasn't provoked or terribly humiliated either. There were two of us, and Jimmy was Jimmy, so why bother? He probably grumbled something like "crazy," picked up his brim, and kept walking. He wasn't gonna get stuck on the likes of me, Mr. Really Stupid. Instead, he, Mr. Much Smarter, was going to make it to work on time and unharmed. But that was as far as I was willing to go to try to impress anybody with my reliable recklessness now, and so failing to ignite anything felt like an ass because even that buffoonish gesture was enough to get a fool killed or locked up. So for this case and for that time, the point was made: I was a jerk. A drunken, foolish jerk *outa' wauta'*. Hallelujah. Now let's get back to serious business: drunk, stoned, and fucking business.

Yeah, drunk. Drinking has its benefits. That's why it's done. The disrespect from the Missy management towards the other drivers and me, an ill-placed outsider, was as constant as it was corrosive. Verbal sarcasm, condescension, and suggestions of the type of exploitation that manifests itself in solicitations wanted; *bribery accepted*: pay the dispatcher (Leanard, who hated being called Lenny), to get the better calls like the airport runs, but that wasn't gonna work for me. It was way too complicated, and I didn't need to be under any third-rate car service dispatcher's thumb. Fuck that. That type of low-life backbiting amongst the bottom dwellers, with me tucked somewhere deep in Missy's bowels—a place I was neither wanted

nor appreciated but not looking to get away from and start again somewhere else either, at least not yet—lower even than the bowels of Howley's flophouse, summarized the rancid stench of my depressing existence. No one fired me or even threatened to since, bottom line, I was turning over the full amount of cash expected at each shift's end, and drivers come and go on their own, so job security wasn't an issue, but as the nights and weeks rolled into a month or two and more, my threshold for absorbing abuse was finally about to be meaningfully crossed.

There was another driver, a real Vietnam vet with badly pockmarked skin who supposedly had some kind of disability not immediately apparent, perhaps from combat, but he was a day driver, a long blond-haired and bearded fellow still wearing his military flak jacket and looking like a Manson protege, who regularly drove drunk. More than once, he'd only semi-discreetly pull out his flask right there in the office and swig from it in view of the other drivers, daring anyone to comment or object, even seen by the dispatcher, but no one said *boo*, so the bar for drivers and customers was really, really low there, and to me, that meant easy for these working welfare cheats to exploit. Aside from witnessing his public booze-guzzling act, the final straw, there were months of accumulated and triggering events, mostly in the form of insults, but the specific incidents are happily lost in the forgotten land of forever. Regardless, the moment came when, during the switch from day to night shifts, the busiest time in the office there, after purposely getting shitfaced, I barged in and told them all off in a very emphatic and visceral way: "*Now hear this, attention on deck you low-life motherfuckers!*" It was a long and loud dissertation of I quit—fuck you all. In fact, it's not even clear if there was a plan to do that or just a quiet and steadily growing impulse towards it finally exploding. Either way, though it may have been timed for a night off when the money was up to date and the current account could be quickly and cleanly closed, that's not what happened. Instead, even better, my "*take this job and shove it!*" moment occurred when the whole crew was there, everyone present in prime time, both shifts, maybe ten or twelve people, a full house in the rickety, screened-in, and vinyl-covered rickety porch like I must have suddenly intended, drivers from day and night shifts including Jimmy's pal Feeney, Lenny and Missy's grandma', the chain-smoking Ma' Barker with bunions in

a housecoat and slippers owner (minus Tito, probably lucky for us both). Anyway, I went in there full to the gills with John Barleycorn at about 5:45 p.m., between shifts where everyone was present and blew up at the lot of them, screaming the itemized contents of every indictment grudgingly held i.e., all the disrespect and abuse. Surprisingly, no one interrupted or tried to shut me down; they wanted to see and hear the show. All I heard in response was them repeating—the one or two that did—not even yelling but suggesting again, almost trying to soothe me, that “you’re a square peg trying to fit a round hole,” and of course, as we all could see and all well knew, me included, they were absolutely right. So that’s how it ended—without a whimper, instead, a self-satisfying roar—without any blood, fists, cops, or criminal accusations, just venting the painful spleen and spilling it out all over the office and right to their faces, which was not only well deserved but relieving, like vomiting out bad food after holding it in by swallowing it for months. On that sour but justified note, it was easy to conclude that since this was a classic square peg and round hole dilemma, being exiled to Rockaway in the first place as the foundational substrate, then it didn’t really matter which mismatched round whole it was gonna be; there were other car services, in fact, better ones by every measure, and one of them was in walking distance from Howley’s, which was to be my next and final stop in Rockaway wonderland. The tirade even got back to Jimmy via Feeney, who told him about my ballistic meltdown on the entire outfit, to which I was somehow informed that an amused Jimmy, recalling his pal who started the onboard “race riot” at sea, added: “That’s my friend, Rob, from the navy.”

The Rockaways wrap up

“I had skin like leather and the diamond hard look of a cobra...”
– Hard To Be a Saint in the City, Bruce Springsteen (1973)

Though hardly a saint, nor even an aspiring one, without all those vital attributes, it was hard just being me in that city, basically groping my way through the dark, followed closely by the cloud, and heading three-quarter-

speed towards the abyss where my fate was all but *accompli*. Someone was gonna make me dead there; it was only a matter of time. In desperation, genuinely frightened by the prospect, I made a call “home”—to my mother, basically begging her to let me come back, but that was a long dead horse. She may have offered me some money (anything to keep me away), which I declined. It wasn’t a money issue. So, the “bad seed” hung up the phone and resigned himself to the present. The car service up on the main north-south drag connecting the quarter-mile strip of ocean to the channel, 116th Street, with its own stop on the A-line, also separated the Rockaways from the next neighborhood up, just west of the bridge, Breezy Point, a different world: a world without welfare cheats, flophouses, housing projects or midnight maniacs. Along with aluminum-sided, ranch-style, one-story houses, there were two- and three-story brick and stone homes, many with tall trees on their lawns and lining the clean, wide streets, neatly maintained property in the front and back with fenced-in yards, everything well-kept, nothing commercial, all residential real estate, nice. The clientele came from both sides of 116th, which was also an added benefit to me; a wider territory meant more flesh to feast on if I could get to it. The clock was always either running or preparing to; whichever side of the tracks my quarry happened to be located didn’t register, or even if it had, wouldn’t matter. Of course, this also meant needing to learn new territory, but having already driven the Rockaways for a few dark months, I had a head start there, which accounts for my getting quickly hired, this time without a respectable neighborhood reference walking in and signing up with me. And the money was better, which is always a positive factor in any employment equation. Not long after starting, maybe only a couple of weeks later, one of the regular fares, a middle-aged Jewish woman who owned one of those homes, got the feeling she knew me well enough to offer me her upstairs apartment for a reasonable weekly rent, where it would be light years more comfortable and presentable than the drunken monk’s quarters at Howley’s. No offense meant to anyone who ever took me in, including Bill Howley, but for starters, it wasn’t in a slum; it wasn’t above a stinking barroom next to a decrepit and abandoned amusement park; and the room had its own kitchenette and bathroom. I took a good look around; it was more like a studio apartment than a flophouse room; it was spacious, clean, and neatly furnished, so “yes,” I said, then quickly packed up my trusty new pillowcase

luggage at Howley's, said my goodbyes, and made myself gone. But I wasn't entirely done with my former homestead, *Chateau Howley*. Not just yet. I'd be back for another game of drunken pool and another round of ugly self-abasement.

Turns out Jimmy wasn't all that impressed with my cap-slapping stunt either; it put him in jeopardy, like with Hannibal back at the Arizona, only without the unpleasant surprise. Anyway, because of that and in general, we were both beginning to get on each other's nerves. Of course, he had Mary to spend the lion's share of his time with and attention on, and I had my own game to play, to which I remained faithfully dedicated, so by then it might have been weeks since we'd seen or connected with one another. After settling somewhat into my new environment, and since it was a second-floor studio in a private home, of course, it was quieter, cleaner, and more peaceful than living on top of a neighborhood barroom, but in its way, it was a lot less private. As there was only one tenant, and that tenant was me, my comings and goings could not be fully ignored by or kept from the owner's family, who lived just beyond the veneer of the semi-private front-door entrance. They put up a sheetrock and wall-paper separation wall to somewhat shield the stairway, which landed and began just inside the front door, from the view of the adjacent ground-floor living room, but it didn't quite cover it, leaving a gap where the front edge of the sheetrock fell short of the doorway wall by a half-foot or so, so getting past them discreetly, in or out, even in mock privacy, was impossible, and on top of that, the sounds from both upstairs and down bled right through the thin walls, including my footsteps, making me uncomfortable and constantly self-aware. At the bar, I was fairly anonymous, one of several room-renters or one of many commuters if you included the bar patrons, but here I was the star tenant.

Anyway, two or three weeks after moving in, I headed back to Howley's on a night off to meet up with the old boy. No calls or appointments, I was just going to be there and if he came in, I'd see him, and if he didn't, I'd just play pool and get drunk on the jukebox anyway, try again another time, so either way, it was going to be a night out. And that it was. This particular late-winter, early spring night out was pouring with cold, dark rain blowing in from the ocean, the wind whipping it left and right and back again until it

was guaranteed to soak whoever had to walk more than five feet through it. Inside the bar was me, the bartender (not th/e owner), and three or four more lonesome desperados gathered together to share pitchers of sorrow and emptiness in this dimly lit, grimy gin mill on a rainy Rockaway night. The dude I was shooting with was a diamond-hard-faced, cobra-looking local. I'd seen him around on weekdays, seemingly aimless, tall and trim, always wearing his signature black leather pants and matching jacket, looking like he stepped right off the cover of a Springsteen album, apparently unemployed, and I doubt he was any type of musician, despite his cap pulled down and just over to the side, covering a single eye, and all reminding me of a grizzled Tom Waits who never reached his prime. One minute we're playing nicely like semi-civilized drunkards, the next we're outside in front of the joint where I'm squaring off with him in the rain, eyes blurry from wind and rain, dizzy from booze, and barely sober enough to get my hands up with no recall whatever of what led up to this, not a totally unfamiliar scene, when he pops me once or twice in the mug and I go right down, crashing to the flooded concrete ground, half sitting, half soaked, half crouching in the storm from where I can hardly move, let alone get up. It's not my face; those shots I barely felt, but in the crash to the ground, I twisted my right leg, which was now rebelling against my mistreatment by locking up paralyzed in a combination of numbness and pain. The black-clad challenger and reigning champ, along with his second and barroom spectators, now satisfied, headed back inside, match over, T.K.O.'d ten seconds into the first and left me there alone to let fate unfold without any further interference or even observation by the Howley regulars. What did they care? What did I say? What happened? There were no women in there, so it must'a been an argument over a pool game. What else? Economics? Foreign policy? Legislation? Doubtful. I never found out, but like with the dawn of the dead guy, it didn't really matter anymore anyway. Staggered, cold, injured, and now soaking, eventually dragging myself up and limping away, the voice returned: "*This can't be fixed; it's life in the Rockaways. Love it or leave it.*" Up until that moment, I was stuck in it, but now, squatting half paralyzed in the cold rain, it was all moot, the same point I hit outside the police lockup in Broward County for the third and final time a few months earlier. It was "*now*," informed the voice, "*officially a Rockaway wrap.*"

Early the next morning, waking just after dawn and a mostly sleepless night, somehow making it back in a blackout to my new and very soon-to-be former apartment, I checked the mirror and saw a black and swollen left eye accentuating a deathly pale face, puffy and corpse-like. The move was clear, wrapped, and that, I remembered, so I packed up that trusty pillow case once again, left the door open with the keys on the dresser, and hobbled as quietly as possible down the stairs and out to the streets, where I limped on my aching leg a few blocks to a stop from where I'd take the first bus, *Gus*. The rent for the next week was due today, in advance, which I don't remember having, so leaving right then had the added benefit of keeping me from that additional shame: a beat-up deadbeat who doesn't have the rent. At least not that. The rent was good until that morning, so at least I didn't totally betray her kindness or all of her faith, just most of it. The humiliation and degradation had grown so acute that the only conceivable move was to exit—another escape—not by thumb to another state but by bus and only to another county. This was going to be one long, humiliating, degrading trip, limping through the TV commercial suburban landscape with a black eye and carrying a pillow case slung over my shoulder aboard connecting public buses, which, by journey's end, would hopefully deliver me safely to the selected destination. It must have been an idea under consideration for quite sometime before because once ignited in the cold soaking pools of the sidewalk the night before, it struck fully activated at wakeup from where it had been waiting in the wings, worse come to worst, Plan B, only standing by for the execution command. I was headed to Plainview, Long Island, maybe only about thirty or forty miles away, but far enough from Rockaway, Queens, to be another galaxy, heading to a world I was familiar with from the past but now in a new and unfamiliar location (Kabbo: Volume I). No longer clustered together in trailers on some out-of-the-way, mostly hidden from view, county back-lot between the community college and nowhere, Topic House, the therapeutic community and my former court-mandated home, was now located on the fancy north shore, in some sort of pre-World War I style institutional mansion on a spacious, multi-acre lot of prime Nassau County real estate. A huge structure, like the "old house" before it, with similarly designed slate, tile, and stone materials, maybe military, maybe another officer's barracks, or a learning or research academy of some sort, a thirty-or-more room, three- or four-story imposing

presence on several acres of well-kept, bucolic, grassy, and tree-lined county land. They knew me there, and I knew they'd open the doors and let me in. My appearance there, shamed, injured, and defeated, exactly as I was, beat-up, bruised, and humiliated, limping with a black eye and a pillowcase of belongings slung over my shoulder, offered a perfect "object lesson," as they'd call it, better than any cardboard sign or shaved head that they'd enthusiastically use to help illustrate their core operating principle: life could not be successfully managed without their support. See? It was a cult, and you needed them. Or else! Got it? They denied the former while promoting the latter. Okay, but cults are what cults do, and cults inculcate exactly that kind of forced and fraudulent dependency and though I still didn't buy into that delusion I was now, out of options, willing to play along.

In truth, it was actually more like the opposite. They needed people to believe in them and act that way, without which they'd perish, cease to exist, have no clients, no funding, meaning no cushy county jobs with nice salaries and plenty of perks, but that was looking at it from the other way around, from the outside in. Today, I was the beggar. That was undeniable, so of course, they'd still put me on the Prospect Chair, probably for days this time, with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for every meal and sleeping on a thin bed sheet beside it on the cold linoleum floor. They'd brought plenty of them along on the move to Plainview from Mitchel Field, so despite being gone for over two years and having completed my court-ordered term there when I left, I'd still be considered a "*split returning to the house*." Their house, their rules. A splitee returns, right. Okay, true enough. That meant at least a guaranteed thirty-day work contract; more degradation, fine; but I'd be housed and fed, maybe even more, supported somehow until I could stand back up on my own and not end up buried in a ditch under a bridge or with blown off fingers back in jail. This time around, though, and after a whole day of enduring the humiliation of public exposure like this to fellow passengers, the driver, school kids, laborers, and elderly shoppers, either staring briefly at the pitiful and odd sight or politely ignoring me, they'd have to consider that I was on my own here, which had to be worth at least some points; no black-robed Samenga, mousy Sue Andrews, or step-on-your-neck Mickey Cleava cornering and ordering me. This was

pure and honest desperation, and so, in that sense of my own volition, I am returning to Topic House.

Yeah, pitiful, but this time though, my circumstances perfectly fit the “treatment of people in crisis” framework, so *it’s going to have to be okay like this*, advised the voice while hobbling like Chaplin’s little tramp from the last bus stop across the busy suburban boulevard and up the long and neatly paved driveway that curled through the huge campus front lawn and through the massive wrought iron gate, at least for now. *I’m troubled and hurting, broken and completely on my own here at twenty-one and I don’t know how to live. I can’t seem to make it work.* I’ll have to “cop to it” and swallow whatever shred of base pride may be left to explain myself to the staff by employing the sincerest version of myself that can be presented. This time there’d be no defiance or apathetic shrugs, not even any blame in response to their obligatory, key and first query: *why are you back here?* At least at some meaningful level, I was and surely felt broken, and needed to accept internally that in the here-and-now of reality, if there’s anything real at all about me or the world outside me, this is a true and bona fide case, in living color, with a front-row seat of a person in *crisis* in need of *treatment*, so bring out the peanut butter sandwiches and the Prospect Chair, I know the drill, time to get on with the show.

Chapter VII: *The abyss*

Elizabeth

It had been over two years, so naturally, there was turnover; there was turnover to one extent or another practically every day. There were a few but not many familiar faces, mostly among staff, which was a good thing, as the history we shared was the basis for moving forward, wherever that happened to be. Yeah, hallelujah, as I had hoped, they took me in. After spending a night and the better part of the second day on the chair, I was admitted and began the contract, which, compared with life on the cold, dark, and wet streets of Rockaway, felt like a refreshing summer day in the warm breeze. And there were the ladies. Girls, fellow “family” or “house members,” or “sisters,” the ones you weren’t supposed to touch or even flirt with, one of whom stood way out and grabbed my eyes, ears, and something even more to the point, figuratively speaking, of course, but in any case, she was captivating and I was captivated. This wasn’t going to come to fruition in twenty-four hours—forget that, not here, probably not even twenty-four days, as the house rules were decidedly prohibitive on that score—but I was determined to stick with her until fruition, whatever it took. She was that hot, and she encouraged me—a Jewish girl too—so obviously, case closed, I was on it.



Her family was well-off; they owned a fancy car dealership and a home on the “gold coast” of Long Island’s north shore, not far from the facility, where she was raised as a spoiled little rich girl, like her own horse stables and at

least one horse kinda' spoiled. Despite all those material advantages, this wild, young, Brooke Shields-lookin' beauty, a year or two older than me, liked to work as a stripper in the city to support her dope habit, heroin, and the needle, as if it were all a game, fun shocking her relatives, debasing herself for cash from strangers. Hell. At twenty-one? I was okay with that; I could work with that; just let me get inside, just let me get a piece, and we'd deal with whatever comes up later, so insisted the testosterone-driven voice. In fact, though, any plan for that type of fruition was clearly better left delayed for a time when we were both free to leave the house and make our way towards each other out there in the world unobstructed. In the meantime, as I worked through my contract and began acclimating to the new and improved therapeutic community lifestyle, as *culty* as ever, we'd have to satisfy ourselves with subtle flirtation, heavy on glances, occasional whispers, and deeply suggestive innuendos, all together were compelling enough to keep me totally nuts for her. For example, when she entered or exited a room, even a crowded one, I felt it. For further clarification on life in a T.C. in the seventies, consult my earlier memoir, *Kabbo: Volume I*, when at eighteen I served a one-year court-mandated term there. But for now, here's a very brief refresher: It was a co-ed facility and probably as multi-ethnic and multi-everything else as could be found in Nassau County then, but otherwise, it was quite strict. Lots and lots of rules, procedures, jargon, rituals, and beliefs—like I said, a cult, a whole 'nother universe intended to straighten out the wayward residents in "crisis" by imposing that type of comprehensive, long-term rigor and discipline as a way of encouraging adjustment to the larger and looser system already in effect outside, meaning the straight world of middle-class convention. So, it was strict, and especially so with regards to the three "cardinal rules" they made secular anti-sacraments: no sex, no violence, and no drugs (they might as well have chosen food, water, and oxygen as far as I was concerned.) Breaking any of these three usually meant the penalties rendered in response would drown whatever temporary gratification might have been achieved by their violation in a sea of humiliation, loss, and regret. All that meant even low-key flirting was risky because a key house policy encouraged snitching. They'd insist: "*Good people* (a sarcastic term for those that don't snitch) *kill people*," meaning that it was in everyone's best interest to be on the same page and play by the same rules at all times. Letting someone slide by

seeing them or even hearing a rumor of them breaking a rule and not dropping a *pull-up* (a public rebuke) or a *haircut* (a formal, ritualized dressing down) on them meant you were complicit in their falling back and slipping down the metaphorical stick to skid row or so-called *dopefiend values* where they'd end up in bad, dark places, and you were holding guilt, theirs and now yours as well, by enabling a "negative contract," an offense by itself. Fat chance everyone was gonna actually buy into all that: us "dopefiends," as the staff casually labeled us, and our dopefiend ways, meaning depraved ways lacking in any guiding ethical or moral principles or character standards beyond a sustained commitment to and preeminence of quick, complete, and even petty gratifications. You'd steal your cancer-stricken, pain-wracked grandmother's morphine for a high and laugh about it. You're a dopefiend. Conniving. Conflating wants and needs, confusing them, and justifying decisions and behaviors aimed at satisfying those needs no matter who or how anyone else got hurt, including yourself, a slave to the demands of your *id*. Most "residents" bought into their storyline, at least to some degree, so you had to be on guard at all times because there was plenty of routine brainwashed ratting going on. Of that, you could be sure, so the unspoken rule was: *trust no one*, the closer the relationship was, or appeared to be, the more likely one of the parties would betray the other. But we were both there and knew where we were, though how exactly she came to be there was vague. Nevertheless, our eyes were on one another, and the green light from hers was all it ever took for me to quickly assign Elizabeth Schapelle the exclusive target I was now, and at least until fruition, firmly and fully committed to.

Staff

It seemed that Jim Jones, the inscrutable, red-headed and bespectacled director who gave me a copy of *Civilization and its Discontents* in 1976, had moved on. While some of the staff were veterans of the Mitchel Field complex, there was turnover among them too. My own particular assigned case worker (everyone gets one), Nancy something or other from back then, and the unforgettable, man-eating, sharp-as-a-vicious-tack redhead Joan Hoffman were gone too, as were a lot of the other memorable

characters of the Topic House staff. But aside from the director and these two headliners, it's not clear who they were. Some of them, it was rumored, had fallen and returned to the skids. Meanwhile, the past was moot, as most of my attention was now focused on a significantly closer and significantly more compelling target, the current *objet du désir*.

One of the veteran staffers was a cool dude, a trim, mustachioed Latino who looked something like Emiliano Zapata, probably a Mexican-American by the name of Carlos Beltran. Carlos was an actually recovered dopefiend from the Bronx who went on to earn academic degrees in psychology and sociology after paying some heavy (prison) dues before cleaning up his act, so he had both street and classroom credentials. He respected me for exactly who he saw me as, and not so much for how I tried to "portray" myself, as a "tough guy with the intellectual wrap." So, despite the shame of having "fallen" and being in need like I was, showing up as I did, it was good to see him, and the feeling was mutual. Back in that earlier term spent serving that mandated year, he and a female staffer, a much sweeter and chunkier, motherly but equally tough former resident hippie-chick and recovered dopefiend, Donna Chimera, were my "set group" leaders. Set Groups were weekly, ninety-minute therapy sessions with a small, fixed group of maybe six or seven residents at the same place and time. The special thing about these meetings was that you could say and reveal anything without incurring consequences outside the group, like freely unloading guilt, cursing someone out, or telling a female how much you wanted her. Here, group sanctity was another sacrament. If you were on a cigarette ban as an "object lesson," you could grub one and smoke it during the group. That kind of sanctuary thing, a group therapy exercise where you were supposed to learn how to work out your people issues, functioned pretty well that way by providing a conducive forum and trained support for the process. So Carlos, and to a somewhat lesser extent, the other holdover group members, staff, and residents, were not strangers to me, nor I to them.

My first shaved head OL came back then, on my first tour, after tossing, not throwing, but an underhand toss from about ten feet (swallowing rage) at a fellow inmate fool that provoked me, yeah, it was in anger, an ex-air force

dude named John Green, a 'nam vet who liked to portray himself as too moral for the US military, chiding enlisted men for referring to atomic weapons casually and dismissively as "nukes." That annoying dopefiend was so righteously above all his moral inferiors in uniform. Sure. And now you aim your condescension at me? *Here. Have an aerosol can in your gut, catch!* At the last instant, I held back the force, but the loss of impulse control cost me, I still tossed it. He ratted, of course, and there were witnesses, so that was that. Anyway, whether it was a cardboard sign or a shaved head, that wasn't the major point. The real point was the loss of status—that now you were under these further restrictions, whether it was a Total Ban on music or on another resident, which defined your current house status. "*He's on an Object Lesson*," and in the case of a Total Ban OL, you are now officially and specifically prohibited from registering with or in any discernible way engaging with the entity from which you were banned. The restrictions on OLs in general and the associated impositions ranged from the petty to the profound; there were no desserts, no dancing, no card games, chess, TV, music, reading books, and no simple diversions or pleasures. While everyone else had free time, you might have to work or discuss your feelings, and you were back to noodlehead status (the first thirty-day initiation period) as well, back to day one, most pointedly meaning that, except for the obvious, you weren't allowed any privacy, if anything, you were even more closely watched. Any accrued *I Want Its*, the structured, formalized path of expanding and ascending privileges that were requested weekly, building up over the months towards graduation, "B-stage," are now either suspended or revoked. While on the term, you were prohibited from even asking for any. House time froze or wound back. Instead of diversion, you were supposed to contemplate the infraction and your dopefiend ways while recommitting to ascending the scale by paying the consequences for having slipped down, which were altogether considered a lot less onerous or perhaps even life-threatening than the consequences you'd likely face unprepared for "out in the world," so the thinking was. This term might be only a day or two, a week, a month, or even longer. There was no mandate on that, only guidelines; it was entirely discretionary and up to the staff, including your caseworker, who had all the details. Everything about it was custom-suited to the culprit and the crime. But in the set groups, all bets were off for those weekly ninety-minute

sessions so you could relax a little, feel somewhat freer, and perhaps even one day open up, letting others see you aside from your “image” so you might better see yourself, the key in their eyes to solving your people problems and achieving recovery.

Not long after arriving this time, just over a month or a little bit longer, it's possible a shaved head was part of the readmission fee in the original contract, or it's possible that someone ratted on my “felonious eye-balling” (flirting with) Elizabeth and dropped a *haircut*, exaggerating the claim while staff, looking for a reason to pressure me, could probably see I was having too good a time, so they jumped on it and imposed the ultimate sanction, but in any event, my head was definitely shaved and I was on a contract. One afternoon during that term, I was alone doing some type of degrading work detail like scrubbing the stairway tiles with a toothbrush and soap powder, when Carlos suddenly appeared just above me on the upper landing, heading down the steps on his way out, so just like that, we crossed paths. It may have been the only time we spoke during that whole second, much briefer term, but the memory of that exchange and the way he spoke didn't fade, so calmly and matter-of-factly, it stuck. He stopped for a moment on his way down, close to where I was working so he could keep his voice volume moderate, and said, “*Your problem is that you think you're a monster,*” but I wasn't; “*You're not. It's your parents, Rob; they're the monsters.*” And then, with a slight grin and a quick nod, he winked, then just as suddenly continued out and on his way. Wow... all that, huh? Yeah, well all right, I thought—I'll file that somewhere for future reference for whatever it's worth—“it was you, Charlie, it was you,” and it's doubtful we ever crossed paths again.

A Nightmare in Brooklyn

A small boy lies in his bed, maybe four or five years old, twisting and turning, wracked by nocturnal anxiety, asleep, dreaming; in fact, enduring a nightmare. He dreams he is having a dream, a nightmare, and when he awakes from the dream within the dream, he cries out for his mother to

come to his rescue and provide relief from the terror of the unspecified monstrous fright. When the mother comes rushing into his room in response to his cries, he discovers, much to his horror, that she is the monster he was dreaming of. End of dream.

Back in the old days

Looking back from the present, the spring of '80, to my first tour back in '76-'77, and on the subject of set groups, there's a need to explain a bit more about the young Bonnie Parker lass with the prettiest smile and the greatest ass adorning an hourglass frame below an angel's face I'd ever seen up to that point in life. Yes, she was a wow. A big, certified, wow, big enough to knock what's'r name from Oceanside almost entirely off her pedestal and out of my head. Get the picture? Quite a wow, and in more than a single way. She was a standup chick that wouldn't take any shit and would bash your head in with a brick if you fucked with her boyfriend, and it didn't matter if you were a cop; yes, she'd do it, and in fact, did do it. That's what brought the eighteen-year-old there—the blond Bonnie Parker. Loved her, fixated and obsessing over her every word, move, or facial gesture, who she was with, who was gaining on me getting into her zone—staff or residents—and she knew it, and she played along to a point. There was plenty of competition, which I saw and understood, but it didn't stop me, so it was about her. Like me, she too was there under court order for some type of heavy criminal case. Her boyfriend was already sent up for—drugs and violence and associated crimes—and they were giving her a possible break by putting her there as a condition of her case sentencing, so it was mandatory and backed up by a trip up the river if she fucked up, which was easy to do, just like my dilemma, only worse. I had an end date; hers was open-ended, i.e., until “B” stage, so I appreciated her position, and it kept me somewhat in check, not wanting to make life any worse for her.

Despite my best efforts at discretion, resorting to using the main house blackboard, which I regularly commandeered to write her coded public messages in chalk, using only symbols that she might recognize and understand, this was a doomed approach, all but guaranteeing eventual

failure by just being in that kinda' intense, *fish bowl-full of rats examination room* for so long. So, naturally, came the day they put me on a Total Ban with her. That meant even more subterfuge. Luckily, there was a built-in crack in that wall of silence they imposed on us. We were in the same set group. *Hallelujah!* And set groups are inviolate. That meant she knew me as I knew her, and she understood my symbols because we spoke about them in the group: graffiti with stars, sailboats, and kites; song lyrics; sketches; and rhymes that I made sure she understood, and as she could, she'd respond with timely glances and sly smiles, but either way, I was always watching. It was really quite impossible for staff to succeed at what they were trying for, a "total ban" like that. You could Total Ban dessert, a Christmas party, stuff like that, TV, and other males, but Jennifer from me? They could make life more difficult, and they did, but they couldn't stop it. It wasn't like I'd see her only once in a while, crossing paths out in the world somewhere and being able to take a quick pass on the sporadic events as they came by; this was steady exposure in my highly vulnerable state of forced celibacy and constraint, both of us prisoners of the therapeutic community life. Basically, though, forget it; the call of nature was infinitely stronger than any house rules could ever hope to match or overcome, and they knew it, so the whole exercise was just another self-justifying setup and gratuitous effort at thought control in the cause of "recovery."

The point of all this rehashing and its outcome, detailed explicitly in Volume I, is to remind readers that I blew it with Jennifer. Though it seemed as if she gave me a chance to stake my claim with her during a pivotal moment of real privacy, close enough for a kiss, the costs involved in possibly sacrificing both our future freedoms ended up being too great a risk to bear in my eyes. She'd be "holding Cardinal Rule guilt" as would I, but for me, it didn't much matter as my term was due to expire in a matter of a few short weeks, whereas hers could go on indefinitely, leaving her with a heavy burden we wouldn't share, so I passed. In fact, she soon after did sacrifice hers, but with another house member, both of them opting for each other and the fugitive life. That was how things went back then. But given that history, now that it seemed fate had provided me with another shot, I was committed not to repeat it.

On the Trail of Her Tail

Somehow, after just less than three months, the situation between me, Elizabeth, and the house led to the inevitable. Despite the fact that there is no recollection of specifically why or exactly how, the T.C. weight came down on us. The female equivalent of a shaved head was ordered for her, apparently, because it was decided that her flirtations, without even any physical contact, constituted a capital offense, the transgression of one of the three so-called Cardinal Rules warranting the heaviest sanction, a thirty-day contract wearing the dreaded stocking cap as an OL. Elizabeth, vain, shallow, and spoiled as she was, wasn't sticking around for any of that action, so she preempted the execution of her sentence by splitting the scene, leaving me behind but not without enough clues and information (like her parents' home address) to find her, which, upon learning of her sudden but not very surprising departure, I promptly split the house to do. Knowing I'd hear about her departure almost as soon as it occurred, she made no effort to say goodbye. She knew I'd find out quickly. The word on recent *splittees* spread rather quickly, and she also knew the vital information had already been received, so as soon as it got to me, at most maybe an hour after the event I sat down on the Prospect Chair, following the prescribed departure ritual and respectful protocol, and then, still in the bright light of the warm early summer afternoon, was out the gate and on the trail.

This time, despite being there for almost three months, no one followed me out the door trying to talk me out of it. The place had changed, mellowed, and, in that way, gotten even stranger. The urgency was gone. Now it seemed like people were more like just hanging out there, living reasonably comfortable commune-style lives on the county dime. So, without even packing a pillow case, I made my way by foot across the vast, multi-acre property lawn. Time was pressing, as finding her after daylight faded would be much harder. My focus was clear, fast, and unidirectional. The voice: get to her. The address was not far—maybe less than five or so miles—and even without public transportation, it was reachable if you could hack hoofing it for hours and hours and there was no interference. Passing a similar joint on my way out, the oft-mentioned in my circle of drunks and ne'er-do-wells *Plainview Rehab*, looking like another huge English prep

school turned factory, same architecture, and design, a place for rehabilitating drunks, which apparently was its own class of crisis. There I crossed paths with a local junior high school pal from the cursed Rock who was currently in residence there, presumably being rehabbed. The red-headed, blue-eyed, and pale-skinned wildman Keith Broffle and I seldom if ever hung out together, just the two of us, mostly because he was two or three years older than me and hung with a different crowd of burnouts, musicians, hoods, and dropouts, but we knew of one another. Same ballpark, different teams. He had a wild younger sister too, another heavy-duty party girl, a sexy redhead named Karen, who I spotted one time unconscious, drunk, or OD'd right on the floor of a school assembly hall beneath the seats, leaving a lasting impression of the troubled family. Aside from those sparse details and the memory of a recent night above the Brown Derby, a downtown Long Beach bar frequented mostly by our darker neighbors, in a cold tenement second-floor stairwell, where we wrestled each other for possession of a large kitchen knife that he was fixing to thrust into someone (not me) during some type of shirtless January drunken melee, I was just trying to save him from himself, and from the looks of things, that time I succeeded. Aside from that, there were few other shared personal histories. Anyway, out on a break from the inside treatment program, he noticed me trudging along. Surprised and pleased, he called out, stopped me, glad to bump into a well-known guy from back home, high-fived and wide-eyed, then in his typical droll, semi-stoned manner inquired about my plans and path: "*What's happenin', Kabbo?*" After bringing him up to quick speed, he reaches into his front pants pocket, "*here,*" he says, taking out his wallet, and hands me an unsolicited ten spot, which in fact was quite meaningful back then, not just in terms of the well-timed kindness, generosity, and camaraderie it delivered but also in practical terms: I was otherwise penniless but now had bus fare and beer money. Thanks, Keith, who a short time later OD'd, checking out of this world permanently and checking into the great gilded rehab in the sky—or maybe even a better place, I hope. Either way, rest in peace, my friend, gone but not forgotten, and thanks again for that friendship on an otherwise friendless day.

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"Splittees end up dead or in jail."

That was one of the key mantras they repeated over and over, so often that it lodged itself, lingering in the background of one's thoughts, whether or not you believed it. Maybe we did, maybe we didn't, we'd quietly console ourselves, and in fact, sometimes they did and other times they didn't, I'm guessing, so it was definitely taken with a side order of subjectivity, but nonetheless, it remained, active or dormant. Me? Maybe, but probably not. I'd be okay. It was time to hunt down and take the beautiful dopefiend babe. That was all that concerned me as I doggedly pounded the shoulders of the quiet, clean, smooth, and shady country roads of the legendary north shore's gold coast, Upper Brookville's roads, searching on foot for a mailbox at the end of a long driveway with an Old Wheatley Road address on it. That's a seldom-seen sight in these parts, a lone pedestrian, as there are no bus stops or even many stop signs on these country roads, no traffic lights, 7-11s, or service stations either, so there's no observable reason for there being any. It was mainly estates hidden by long driveways, and with the almost freshly shaved head adding to the spectacle, though innocent enough, it still called sufficient attention to itself that a squad car from the NCPD pulled up alongside me to politely inquire about my doings and being there. Well, wouldn't you know it? I'm not off the property more than a few hours, and already I'm handcuffed in the back of a police car, in which they're taking me not to the precinct house for an appearance ticket or a discussion about what I was doing there, now moot, but directly to the country jail, the one I vowed never to return to (as a minor) but was now heading back to (no longer a minor). Turns out all that talk I heard or thought I heard, about "unsupervised status" regarding my probation beginning several years ago, the one I told the Navy about, was either all fabricated in my head, misstatements by the authorities, misinterpretations by me, or some other type of bureaucratic error. In any case, it turned out to be untrue, flat-out wrong, as the current handcuffs attest. Apparently, no one told the judge. This was a bench warrant issued for violating probation by failing to report. Huh? Report? Yeah, "report" to probation, and a bench warrant means you have to be brought before the bench, meaning the original sentencing judge. You're his property now, and he decides what's fabricated, misinterpreted, misspoken, misunderstood, and by whom and

what's not. It was well into the third or fourth year of a five-year term by then, and as for Samenga, well, he was doing his time on a summer vacation, which meant no bail, again, like the time before at 16, so that meant I had to sit, wait, and survive in a hard, steel cell in a very dangerous neighborhood before being brought before his bench whenever he was scheduled to come back and my case was reached on his calendar. That meant it was going to be an uncertain, possibly long, and certainly stressful brand-spanking new bid.

It took days to reach her by phone; there's no way to tell exactly how it eventually happened, but when nothing was going to stop me, that included not letting steel bars, concrete bricks, or being flat broke stop me. Somehow we connected, and when we did, she informed me that she was now homeless too. Her parents would not let her move back in. She was twenty-two years old at the time, old enough for them to close the Old Wheatley Road door, so I put her in contact with my old, best blood brother and sparring partner pal, Hannibal Hayes, who had his own place in Freeport, where he worked as a fisherman, and where he kept her sheltered for me until I got out. That's what friends are for, right? Of course, I understood they'd probably get it on, but if I couldn't be there, I figured—and I hadn't even touched her yet myself—it seemed better that way than the likely alternative of her finding her own way without me, back at the strip bars with the bikers and perverts, and so probably losing her. By putting her with Hannibal, at least I had her on a short leash not far from my grasp, and she was safe and secure enough at the same time. Every choice has its costs. She would visit me once or twice a week when she could make it to the jail without a car of her own. He probably gave her a lift from time to time, or she'd bus it, but we could and did continue feeding that flame that way, growing more intense with every visit, holding hands across the metal table in the visiting room, the eye contact with the intoxicating promises. It's exciting for some girls to be visiting a bad-boy boyfriend in the slammer, and she was just that type: an over-sexualized, dopefiend stripper thriving on spite, lust, and risk, building and building up the steady, slow, inexorable tension heading toward the certain coming fruition. I wasn't going to be locked up forever. In the meantime, I had to survive long enough to get to her while I was still alive and fruition remained possible. This was jail, not a

T.C. There were no "cardinal rules" except the jailhouse ones, a whole 'nother system.

Locked up abroad at fifteen. Another taste of hell.

At closing in on twenty-two, jail or incarceration of some sort wasn't new to me. By this time, I already had that thirty-day "skid-bid" on my résumé at sixteen, several overnights in the county-seat police lockups in no less than two states, and a year in Topic House, complemented by a short but memorable stay in a foreign land's police lockup at fifteen, so I had international criminal credentials. That was a trip worth describing. With my mother and sister, we spent a week in Jamaica in like '72 or '73, which was one stark lesson in what not to do abroad if you wanna keep alive and breathing free air, at least until returning stateside. Don't let a bag of weed slip out of the crotch of your pants and down your leg while the police are patting you down. In fact, do not be in any situation where the police might even be around you if it can be avoided, let alone patting anyone down you might be with. Just don't be there at all, but if at some point you somehow happen to find yourself there before you knew it, now you do, so get out. Fast. Otherwise, something awful like this may happen to you.

The police barracks in downtown Kingston had their own personal precinct sized jail, similar in placement to the county seat's in Mineola, my hometown police-detention center, close to the courts. Everyone should be familiar with theirs, about twenty cells (or fewer) on the single tier, but otherwise it was a lot different, like a *different world different*. For starters, there was a level of filth I'd never experienced before, much, much worse than that house in the Fort Lauderdale alley, not even in my darkest, unimaginable dreams; animal feces, human feces, the smashed carcasses of thousands of dead insects splattered all over and still hanging from, some still crawling, covering nearly every inch of wall surface surrounding an approximately eight by ten dirt-floor. Dug into the floor's center was a pit, maybe two feet in diameter and a foot and a half deep, a ditch that housed a metal bucket in which all manner of human deposits were made and emptied once a day. The odor from this, combined with the rest of the

horrific ammonia and insecticide, in a zoo-like stench, made the air all but totally unbreathable. You might vomit if you breathed in too deeply, but you'd definitely wretch just by breathing enough, and you had to breathe. On the plus side, though? I had company. As soon as they brought me into the station house, uncuffed me, and opened the thick, steel cell door before ordering me in, I saw there were no bars or windows of any kind, just concrete walls and that solid door. My first view into the pitch of the black darkness was the eyes and teeth of my new neighbors, staring out at me with undeterminable expressions. Several sets but I could hear them whispering in what registered as sudden but subdued excitement. This was not a private, air-conditioned and heated luxury Nassau County Correctional Center jail cell with a cot, pillow, mattress, sink and toilet. Not quite. There was no commissary selling snacks, coffee, and cosmetics delivered to your cell either. No, each cell was like a group home; mine would be shared by five or six young locals, all of whom got a real kick out of seeing me, a white-boy foreigner trapped in the same hideous pit as they were, and this they let me know by applauding and laughing fiendishly out loud when, at some point, probably on day two or three, one of the genteel gendarmes of Jamaica decided to amuse himself at the frightened foreigner's expense.

Word was that you could buy a lotta' weed really cheaply and easily in Jamaica. You didn't have to know anybody special in advance either; you could make a quick connection right away on your own, and the word was so. About an hour after arriving at our hotel in Montego Bay, I took a stroll along the beach just off the hotel grounds, where I was solicited by a local offering to sell me his wares, ganja. Ya mon, I want ganja, and with that, a quick deal was struck. For about five dollars, the guy gave me what must have been a half-ounce spliff, maybe heavier, wrapped completely in thick brown rolling paper, like a huge joint. Back up to the hotel room, with mother and sister already down at the pool, I dug out some foam rubber from one of the unzipped sofa cushions and replaced the gouged-out material with the weed, minus about a nickel bag's worth extracted and packed to-go in an all-purpose, ever-useful, clear plastic baggie. The weed itself didn't feel so strong; burning it was kind of challenging. It may not have been dried out enough, but it burned, so I smoked some of it and carried the baggie with me wherever I went, including out alone at night to

the local bars, where a fifteen-year-old white kid was not only served but was well-received by the local, black friendlies. These were local joints with all Jamaican clientele and I, as ever curious, went out of my way to enjoy the illicit thrill of underage participation, the cool dark glow of the ultraviolet light, the Vodka Collinses, the reggae dance music and a fair amount of attention from some of the single black ladies. At fifteen, though, the prospect of contact of that sort with dark-skinned women was more than a novelty; it was a never-ever, not once done, virgin territory if you will, but as with most adventurous teenagers, curiosity outweighed any sense of risk. *What could I lose?* So I enjoyed myself. It was easy, fun, and cool, but it didn't break any ice, and the possible risk of being considered some type of underage trespasser was not the one that bit me. The one that bit me was further down the path, maybe a night or two later, outside another club, maybe about ten or eleven p.m., with a rowdier atmosphere of both tourists and in-house troublemakers, where the doormen were busy keeping order and known rowdies or potential troublemakers out. A small crowd was gathered at the entrance, maybe a dozen nighttime revelers, where a few more of us, three white dudes, random Americans, long-haired sketchy dudes that just happened to be there when I showed up, me and the two of them, were hanging out a little off to the side in the front parking lot, about ten yards away from the lit-up, roped-off hubbub at the main club entrance. The two other guys were older than me by a few years, so when they asked, I lied to them, saying I was nineteen or something, so they'd let me hang out, which was just before the armed-with-shotguns police showed up, a squad car or two. There was no clear sign of what call they were responding to, if any, because there wasn't any obvious real trouble yet, or if they were just making the usual nightspot rounds when they got out of their cars and approached the three of us, asking for names, passports and ages. "Nineteen," I mumbled, just loud enough for the other two to hear as they patted the three of us down. That was when the baggie of weed slipped down to the asphalt ground through my pants' leg. The cop probably jarred it loose during the frisk. "*Pick it up,*" he ordered, pointing to the bag with the barrel of his rifle. At first, now on high alert and grasping for tactics, I declined and instead tried negotiating by reasoning, "*If I pick it up, you'll arrest me.*" The thing about negotiating successfully, as I discovered, is the appropriate application of leverage, even if it's only the appearance and

presumption of leverage, neither of which I had. "*Pick it up. Now!*" he barked, this time with a much more forceful and commanding tone intended to intimidate and persuade, succeeding in both, so I complied. He wasn't asking anyway, it was an order, so I picked it up and handed it to him. They then arrested and handcuffed me, exactly as expected and feared.

"*Officer! Officer!*" I shouted on day two, even taking the trouble of inflecting a hint of a Jamaican accent, hoping it'd help catch someone's ear and perhaps sympathy. "*Officer!*" I yelled out again, wanting or needing to ask a question or make a statement. Does my mother know I'm here? No one showed up looking for me yet, and my poor mother had no idea. She was terrified, it was later told to me, fearing I may have drowned. They don't give you a phone call or set you up with a lawyer there in happy, little Kingston town, and there's no presumption of innocence either. They do, however, give you a tin bowl filled with some kind of rice and fish bait meal two or three times a day, some rancid water in a tin cup, maybe let you out for a quick, cold shower, maybe not, come in to empty the hellacious ditch bucket once a day, or maybe not. That's the best you can hope for, I saw. Another standout vision was during one of the shower runs when I caught a glimpse of another white guy, skinny and pale, in his twenties or thirties, heading to or from the stalls, his skin covered in welts and scabs. *I'm gonna die here.* My shout was pretty loud and had the tone of real urgency, and since they were coming from a novelty character, they were eventually responded to by one of the gendarmes, who was leaning close to the door by one of the two circular openings, telling me to look out through one of those circular eye portholes so he could see who he was talking to, at which point, once I was properly positioned, he commenced to spray directly into my exposed and open eye the contents of a teargas canister, x-marking the spot, triggering howls of pain and shock from me and howls of fiendish laughter and unbridled joy from my close neighbors. Recoiling against the jolt in a storm of raging cries and tears and shouts, I searched and pleaded, but there was nothing to even wash it off with, or anything even beyond my shirt or pants to wipe it off with, so the pain and the burn only increased as the venom soaked in, my skin burning, melting, mixing with the tears and snot, covering my face from eyebrows to chin, coughing, choking, wheezing, absorbing both the chemical fire agony and the inhuman delight of my

tormentors and companions simultaneously. To them, this was routine newcomers' dues, welcome to hell, and if nothing else, free entertainment.

On day three, sometime in the afternoon, my mother arrived. I watched through the same opening I was introduced to with mace as she approached the building from the property's outer edge, accompanied by two men, locals, the hotel manager and an aide. It appeared as if she had aged ten years since I last saw her three days before. She went to the hotel staff for help once discovering I was missing, so though it took two days of the management making calls, they finally tracked me down, escorted her there, and helped arrange for a local attorney and a quick appearance before a judge who, that afternoon, in a steaming colonial courtroom with Venetian blinds, oak benches, and a ceiling fan, sentenced me to a 75-dollar fine, paid for by mom and a speedy expulsion from his tropical paradise island. So, the latest drama of international criminal intrigue, crime and punishment ended on the third day with an uninterrupted trip from the police lockup to the courtroom to the airport, where the bags were already packed and the ready-for-takeoff flight boarded, back home, still demanding sympathy for my trouble in place of offering it, but still alive, a few days older but not a moment wiser.

Back in county

On the way to the NCCC, I asked the cops if we could stop for me to get a quart of beer and guzzle it before going in; surprisingly, for about a heartbeat or two, they seemed to consider it before turning me down. That would probably have cost them their jobs, so no hard feelings, but I was still going in. The Nassau County Correctional Center and I were not strangers. This would be my second visit since the first back in '74, when I did my brutal thirty-day bid at sixteen in the minor tier, aka gladiator school (Kabbo: Volume I), and then vowed never, ever, to return as a minor, observing that the older inmate crowd would be somewhat less actively savage and so offer a slightly better overall survival probability. On that, I was basically right, at least for as long as the six weeks I had to wait there for Samenga to get around to my now ancient, mostly forgotten, original bullshit case. That

made the point though—if he felt disrespected by my failure to appear, if not justice, this was certainly potent payback. None of that better survival rate thinking means you aren't going to get your head busted or even caved in; you probably will, but you might be able to avoid it longer than on the minor tier where it means sort of like right the fuck away. Being locked in a cage with a crowd of mostly black, mostly young, many very angry and malicious detainees, a handful of lost Latino types, some but not many friendly white inmates to count, and of them mostly either the meek and useless or the aloof and fearsome, dangerous men, the spider web and teardrop tattoo types who use mop buckets filled with water and towels to do curls, it all makes adapting here a real challenge, and the stakes don't get much higher. Add to that the reality that there is no out option, that aside from begging for solitary, "protective custody," or P.C. (or as inmates dub it, *Punk City*), there's nowhere to run, the pressure is always on, and it stays that way. Even after lights out, the howls and shouts, the hideous cacophony of crashing transistor radio blasts of different stations fighting for dominant volume, the counts, the catwalk, the pounding against the cell walls of a beating administered by the goon squad—there's never a real break; there's only action and the intensification of action amid the brief periodic pauses.

On the pretrial detainee floors, you house with inmates covering a range of charges up and down the scale, from scofflaws to murderers, all thrown together in a survival-of-the-fittest Darwinian ring, all for one reason or the other, often money, like they cannot make bail or are held specifically without bail (like me back in '74), or like me now, some technical legal cause, a *bench warrant* let's say, so among the prisoners there is an eclectic, random sampling of who the current biggest fuckups in Nassau County are today. Even at twenty-one, even using it as a stage to prop up my two-bit tough guy, bad-boy act, it's not a place anyone wants to be, not even the well-adapted to prison life like Big Paul, the blond-haired, Aryan-looking biker guy in the last cell at the edge of the tier, a real convict with all the required tats, size, bulk, and attitude, down from his upstate bid to try another case, who would much rather be in state prison than in a county lockup. This I knew because we became pals. He was the one white dude on the tier no one would fuck with. They would have to jump him, get hurt,

and then face payback even if they killed him, especially if they killed him as he might have even been an A.B. or Aryan Brother, i.e., untouchable. That's prison politics, so there was no point in an avoidable conflict with Paul, at least not while I was there, reading his Easy Rider biker magazines and sharing Newports while lounging on his cell floor, my back supported upright by the thin metal wall between cells. Yeah, it was my biker magazine library, and I visited it often. It wasn't hard to be friends with this guy anyway; we were from basically the same neck of the woods—Long Island boys—and though he was a convict, a true one and no dummy, and in contrast, I was just a low-ranking, skid-bidding, jailbird, I got where he was coming from, an unapologetic, outlaw, and I guess he must have gotten me too, an untamed ne'er-do-well. I mean, my charges were okay, acceptable (you don't want to be there with a rep as a "rat," or worse still, a "cho-mo," or rapist), and I guess I handled myself okay as well, walking a thin line between commanding respect, basically by offering it, and provoking a challenge, so there was a measure of refuge in that.

Jail means playing a lot of cards, chess, reading, pushups, waiting for meals, mail, visits, TV and telephone calls. Basically, it means filling your time without getting hurt. Apart from an indirect insult one time, referring to me as "shit" or "bullshit" in earshot but not directly, I was never threatened or challenged. The comment, coming from a thin, smallish black guy, seemed to be in reference to the suggestion that he "*whoop his ass*," to which his reply suggested something to the effect that I was a small fish ("bullshit"), so not worth his effort. Okay, fine. I'll take it, so I played the insult off by registering it with a quick, unsmiling glance without otherwise responding to it. He wasn't talking to me, so there was slack without adding to it or ignoring it. Just right. But it was close. Reacting with any more intensity would have most likely resulted in my being 'trademarked' (visibly bruised up) for Elizabeth to see or forcing Big Paul to jump in. The worse of two evils, in my view just then was visibly bruised, and it's likely that my association with the big, young, prison-fit white guy down at the end of the tier, the dude down from the Attica big-house on another serious beef, probably kept me an arm or two's length from a busted head and a trip back to NCMC (Kabbo: Volume I) all that time. Fine. Mostly, true to form, it was blacks busting the heads of other blacks. Regardless, that happens plenty,

and it's never pretty. Though not the *monkey house* or Gladiator School, it's still jail, in many ways worse than prison, merciless and brutal, bodies on stretchers, so the tension and the fear never fully subside. At times, it grew so intense that I spent days in my cell, just reading, only coming out for a meal, a quick shower, or a visit, keeping my head low while the skin on my hands began peeling from nerves and a case of "jock itch" tortured me endlessly. I couldn't afford to get lumped up anyway and have Elizabeth see me like that, not on a visit and not when I got out either. That meant being extra aware, and that meant extra stress. Living in constant fear like that, only varying by degree, is a "correction" all by itself. Once, during a chess game with a dark-skinned, fierce-looking black dude held without bail on "a body" charge (homicide), things got a little edgy regarding a move on the board. As the disagreement between us grew ever so slightly more intense, increment by increment, at the same time, I slowly began to realize exactly what kind of fire I was playing with, so I ratcheted my intensity back down, increment by increment until he relaxed again. Though it may have started with chess, it quickly became about respect. It's always about respect. It's not about property. It's about respect. It's not about the spot on the telephone line, or cigarettes, pushups, coffee, or snacks. I took those lessons with me from my previous stay. It's always and mainly about respect. Respect. Stress management, biker magazine alliances, and respect. Appreciating that was how I got through. That and probabilities. Sooner or later, though, they're gonna work against you. Probabilities fail; everyone's.

The weeks dragged by, six of them, day after day, meal after meal, card game after card game, punctuated by visits from Elizabeth, who started calling herself "Willow," but I never did, nor did anyone else I ever heard of. Between visits and phone calls were a lot of pushups, and sit-ups while listening to D-Train's *You're the One For Me* and making sure to get that must-have badass jailhouse portrait, the color Polaroid you could buy from the commissary for a buck and have taken in your baddest-boy pose and giving it to "Willow" as a token of her personal rebel without a cause's profound and lasting dedication. The rest of the time and effort was dedicated to planning for after I got out. I was slated to be homeless again. Ma', the ever-nurturing matriarch she was had already seen fit to take me to

Family Court and had me disowned, or as they say in legal briefs, "emancipated," so that was out, and if I wanted to keep "Willow" around, which I desperately did, that would mean finding us a roof to sleep under and a bed to sleep together in, a challenging but true labor of love. Then came the day when I stood, shackled, still crew-cutted from the shaved head and faced the judge for my alleged failure to appear violation. After the time spent already in detention, he cut me loose, totally released, "time served" on the original conviction back in '76, no more probation and just like that, suddenly, a free man once again for the first time in years, trademark free. Now I was Elizabeth's and she was mine, but before the imminent, much awaited and sacrificed for fruition could occur, there was still significant work to be done in the way of Maslow's basic pyramid, or as the Mick phrased it, *gimme shelter*.

The Goldbergers of West Walnut Street

Walking hand in hand up and down the tree-covered east-west streets that run parallel to the shore on a beautiful late June afternoon was as much of a tour as it was an expedition. Willow had never been to *America's Healthiest City*, so I was happy to show her around and show Long Beach around to her, and while doing so, I knocked on the random doors of the massive, two- and three-story Colonial and Victorian homes and asked around, "*Who's renting rooms?*" The seaside, south shore neighborhood was an atypical mix of eclectic identities and backgrounds for Nassau County, with all of them being property owners, representing a range of ethnicities, races, religions, etc., all dug in and keeping up. Although it wasn't, by any means, Upper Brookville, it wasn't a Freeport flophouse shitshack either. It was definitely respectable and comfortable. At least for us, I knew it would be, at least for now, on the cusp of the long-awaited, much-suffered, and much-sacrificed for *night of fabulous fruition*.

One of these multi-level, multi-family old homes, a painted white wooden one with a huge, screened-in front porch and columns atop a six-step stairway, and who even knows how many rooms, was owned by a modern-orthodox Jewish family. The family Goldberger was composed of at least

nine, maybe more kids, ranging from toddlers to teenagers, and they were all Mr. and Mrs. Goldberger's offspring, a busy kosher couple indeed. Despite that, maybe even because of that, and after a short chat, there was a single vacancy in a small upper-floor room, so they took us in. All the business was done by the mom. What a lady, what a family, strength, integrity, honesty, and kindness; true menschen. What a combination! They sensed that Elizabeth and I were fellow tribe members and that we were also obviously not married and non-observant, but not once did she, her bearded and glowing, quietly charismatic husband, or any of the kids ever suggest, imply, or even invite us to partake in a taste of their Torah livin'. It didn't work that way for them because, well, it doesn't really work that way at all. It's not about coercion or even promotion, at least not since Sinai. They had too much respect for themselves and other people to play any of that paternalistic, holier-than-thou routine. Anyway, on their uppermost floor, in what otherwise might have been an immense attic, there were three furnished rooms and a shared bath just outside. Two of them were no more than really large walk-in closets with a twin-sized bed, a dresser with a lamp, a tiny window, and a smaller closet, but the third, situated right between the two smaller ones, was much, much larger and had its own hot and cold running sink and larger windows in two directions, south and east, sunrise and the shore, and we were like three streets from the ocean at the beginning of summer. Sweet. Especially after six weeks in a small cage. It's maybe only six or seven hours after I'm released that same day, focused and determined, possibly financed by mom ("*Here's a \$100, okay? Now just go! I don't really care where, just not here*"); it turned out not so bad, in exactly the position I hoped for, maybe better, and I'm feeling strong so naturally as soon as the proud and no-nonsense Mrs. Goldberger handed me the keys after I handed her the first week's rent up front, and a week in advance it was upstairs, door closed, and ready for a mad dash to heavenly, decadent bliss. I should never have left that house.

The wanton lady "Willow" standing beside me? The one whose hand I haven't let go of since we've been standing here, my dear Elizabeth? Free together for the first time, unguarded and now on our own, despite detecting what I thought were glimmers of derision in her eyes, like a stripper's look when gartering your tips, taking everything I told her a bit less seriously than

I had intended, even noting that quite bluntly and aloud to Ma' and Mom-Mom before we headed out from the Rock and now on our own, "*she's not worth it* [more money]" when they handed me the dough, and in her presence (why exactly I said that is unclear, but there most certainly was a reason), she was now about to be made mine. Then, just upstairs, behind the closed and locked door, a bottle of wine, a loaf of bread, and a jar of honey, all at the same time and in the same place, our bedroom, finally, she commenced to make me hers.

Of course, now that there was a chance for a full-on, in-depth inspection, she had the body of a well-toned twenty-two-year-old stripper and the face of a make-up model, and with them she crept into my mind and once there, rooted out my deepest, darkest, and most sublime fantasies and not only brought them to life but ran with them and me all the way over the rainbow beyond my most vivid imaginings again and again and again. I'm talking bruises, knees, elbows, and unmentionables. I'm talking on the floor; I'm talking on all fours; mirrors and rugs slipping off hardwood; I'm talking 'round the clock. She forbade any barriers, no condoms or artificial lubricants for those very tight spaces, no outside interference at all, even if and when it meant the exquisite agony of submission—hers, mine, and ours—only flesh, flesh, and fantasy, again and again and again. Her shameful and shameless whispers and urgent pleas were all that and more, but aye, there was a rub. Isn't there always? Her kisses, unlike the girl's in the Rockaway theater, well, they weren't exactly right. Something more in the feel than the taste or smell, the technique, though I'm not certain that registered with her because it hardly seemed to interfere with either of us, not ever significantly enough to detract from the overall intensity, not even close, not even once, but nonetheless worth mentioning. There, I think, is where she may have held back, and, generally speaking, the kiss is the *sine qua non*, or the *alpha and omega* if you prefer, of sexual intimacy. Despite that, she took me on a trip I couldn't let go of or get enough of, so I held on tenaciously as she tortured me relentlessly and mercilessly outside that peaceful, private love shack. How? I'll get to it.

After a week or two of night and day, steady and advanced fruitioning, it was time to grab a gig or two, so I headed back to one of the pizza joints,

Amalfi, to pick up some shifts and let Jimmy D know I was back in town and ready to ride with him again. Between these two part-time gigs and exploring with Willow, I was a busy man, now bringing home the fresh ciabatta, honey, and table-sized bottles of Carlo Rossi to further fuel our tireless amore and obviate the need to ever leave that room, except for the necessary across the short hall visits, but never the floor unless it was out the front door for work. What she wanted, she'd remind me occasionally, was for me to agree to her going back to the city to dance topless, where her version of LPN would be seen, touched, felt, and maybe even tasted as Elizabeth's Perfect Nipples, now EPN, my Elizabeth's Perfect Nipples, and I wasn't about to share'm like that with anybody for any reason. Nope. No peeks either. Still though, according to her, it wasn't such a big deal. She tried to convince me it was just work to her: good money, upscale places, no dives; she'd make the good dough, hundreds for every shift, cash, a month of delivering pizza in a single night, and bring it back for us to share, even inviting me to attend. No problem for her; she might even have preferred it, but I wasn't having it, a bridge too far. By this time, possession had settled in deeply, and I was hooked, perhaps even more deeply after each bedroom session, which never really let up, and again, I wasn't about to share her like that with anybody. Period. And not for no money, at that pivotal point, there was a crucial impasse. In addition to that—or part of it, who knows—there was this: women. Her thing was to show me that I couldn't control her, wasn't man enough, or something, pressuring me to act more and more forcefully, physically, ridiculously, and publicly in a failing effort to keep her in line, meaning decent, reasonably respectful, and not putting me to shame. Instead, she was all about shame—mine, hers, her parents, anybody's, and everybody's—putting me in a series of lose-lose-lose scenarios where there was really only one of three available options: let her get away with it, for example, by suddenly changing seats at a movie theater and getting up to move away from me in front of the entire crowd; or I could get up, walk over to her, grab her, and pull her back with me in front of the entire crowd; or just walk away from her completely and go home. That would have been fine, choice number three, but that was far too evolved a move for me at twenty-one, now almost twenty-two, and I was far too hooked in by then, so I chose door number two, yanking her, but believe me, that by itself was painful and shaming enough. What a drag this was,

time after time, and this too never let up. There were only pauses between, and the bedroom activity later on, which in a funky way played right into it all, like an S&M trip that custom fit its two main players, keeping that action going strong for the entire episode we shared. Old bruises would heal as new ones formed, creating a standing precarious balance of sorts. The bedroom phase was fantasy; the outdoors was not. Inside, I was dominant; outside, I was neutered and pathetic.

Her parents' home, the one hidden from the road by a long driveway just off Wheatley Road somewhere in Old or Upper Brookville, the same one I set off to find that day before being so rudely grabbed by the cops and taken in without so much as the courtesy to let me at least have a last quart of Colt 45 before being suddenly thrust back into the tiger cage, had a name, a first to my ears aside from the legendary Tara of Gone With the Wind fame, a big deal, and the name was *La Chaumière*. Pretty fancy, I thought, must be a big deal in some way to have its own name instead of just a street number, but not too fancy for me for a night or a weekend away from the beach, so I accepted their surprise invite and showed up bright and friendly that next Saturday afternoon. This time I made it all the way there without a pit-stop in the country lockup—a good first step—and with their errant daughter, my girlfriend, and new roommate in tow. To say I was welcomed with open arms would be a stretch, pardon the pun because they knew where we met and the historical bullet points of our developing affair. A steady, Jewish graduate student or budding businessman, I wasn't. That was clear. On the other hand, it was also clear that I was crazy about their daughter and had provided shelter and sustenance for us both for weeks now and on my own since the day of my release, and that too was factored in, so even as the not-so-nice Jewish jailbird suitor brought home, I couldn't have been all bad. And they knew their daughter, so this was hardly a shock, and they may have hoped a man dedicated to her like I was might help steady the ship and straighten Willow the dope fiend stripper out a little, so they were desperate enough to give me and us the slight benefit of any early doubt. All that, taken together, made me, in their eyes, an acceptable guest for the night at *La Chaumière*.

The nineteenth-century carriage house at the edge of a much larger estate, maybe four bedrooms, old but not worn, wood-painted white with a slate roof, looked as well-constructed as it was maintained. Together with the horse stables, they sat on the shady grounds and lawns of a peaceful and quiet hollow in one of Long Island's most exclusive areas, and it felt cool just to be there, especially after the first month and a half of summer spent as a guest of the county. Elizabeth's stylish mom and dignified dad treated me with cordial hospitality and acceptance, even closing their eyes to the all but certain likelihood that I'd be sneaking into their daughter's bedroom at the earliest possible opportunity and climbing onto her alcove bed with her, right across the hall from theirs. Well, they were right, and I sure did, but in that particular session we kept to a modified roar so as not to attract attention or disrupt anyone's otherwise peaceful slumber, paving the way for a much warmer Sunday family brunch. Late the next morning, we feasted on bran flakes in half and half cream with fresh fruit and, of course, fresh croissants with jams, or make that *preserves*, and butter as we reclined in comfort on cushioned wrought iron outdoor furniture under wide umbrellas and tall trees in the cool shade of the property. It was no big deal to them, as it was otherwise a typical summer weekend at home, but for me, it was nice, really, really nice and helped scrub some of the jailhouse grime off my self-image. This was a lot better. Now, no longer concerned about getting killed over a chess game, I was dining with jet setters and property owners, imagining myself the soon-to-be scion of a luxury car dealership wearing an ascot, hair slicked back and drinking from a martini glass, as young Willow the dopefiend stripper was their only child and someone had to look out for her. So, there was that too.

But it wasn't my show exclusively. Willow had a role too, which was primarily to shock, provoke, and shame. Sometime later that afternoon, when the three of us, Willow, her mother, and I, had a moment by ourselves, still out on the back lawn under the trees, she suddenly stood up and decided to drop her pants, skimpy G-string panties as well, and show off to her mother some of the bruises she wore as medals and merit badges in testament to the intensity of our heated passion. Momma Schapelle looked puzzled with a hint of disgust, casting her gaze at me, who shrugged and tried my best to appear nonchalant about it while inside feeling the

discomfort of the deep shame she was inflicting on me, as she was entrenched in the habit of, again and again, this time not in a public place like a movie theater or the boardwalk but in La Chaumière, her most intimate space, where I was pinned in place, like a hostage or prisoner now, completely for the moment at her mercy. For me, it was a private thing—our passionate intensity and the ways we shared and expressed it. Mine was so much more personal, so I decided to let her have the stage entirely to herself in that regard. Strippers, exhibitionists, and vicious little tramps—too bad I got stuck on one that fed my craving every minute of every day until the very instant she cut me off and it all came to a sudden, total, and permanent end.

Back at the Goldberger's, our friends in the other little windowless room across the hall—another couple we'd drink coffee with, a big red-headed dude with tattoos and his mousy little blondish wife—became our companions and unofficial guardians. They witnessed my attachment to Willow and how I locked her in the room at times before leaving for work, fearing she'd leave me. While they may have had compassion for my duress, they took to releasing her from the room I imprisoned her in, allowing her to roam free for as long and as far as she wanted. I wasn't her jailer, though I tried to be, and they weren't my enemies, nor were they trying to be. She was just determined to get back to the pole-dancing, stripper game, and shooting dope, and I was a present and relentless obstacle to both, so the situation was inherently unstable and edgy. Wild sex with abandon at night and tension during the day, often having to literally drag her up the three flights. It was crazy; I was crazy, but it was happening even as a few of the Goldberger kids looked on quietly, somewhat entertained but not interfering or getting involved in any way. It was more dramatic than violent; clearly, she was performing, and I was reacting to this painful half-charade of burning love and tortuous tension. It shouldn't have come as much of a surprise, and it didn't, when, sometime in August, after approximately another six-week interval since we moved in, I came home from a job, up the stairs to our room, only to find the door already open and Elizabeth was gone. Not even a note. Nothing. A big, fat zero. Just an empty room, and with it, my spark, the drive that kept me firing steadily, good and bad, since my release from the county. Now, like in an

empty cell, I was alone again. The suddenness, though anticipated, I thought and hoped, might somehow be prevented or at least delayed long enough for some type of balance to set in. Maybe if I showed enough determination beyond locking her in, feeding and fucking her, and dragging her around, but it wasn't at all clear exactly how, marriage was never considered (I wasn't that nuts), so I failed, and the emptiness I sought to prevent now caved in on and crushed me. To me, the sex was so intense and fulfilling, so kinky and immersive, mind and body—two minds and two bodies now one, a complete harmony of erotic fulfillment, intimate, loving, and wild—that the impact of that comprehensive loss caused me to literally collapse on the stairwell in grief and pain and remain there for minutes until gathering enough of what was left of me to stand back up and head out in search.

In a panicked fury, I searched the local night-time streets on foot, checking every place we'd ever been together and checking for places we hadn't—bars, beaches, anyone who seemed like they might know, the side streets, eventually finding myself three towns away in Freeport, where Hannibal lived and where I previously stored her, thinking she may have headed back there, but no. Pounding up those big old house stairs, I knocked on his door with the type of urgency intended to get quick attention, which it did. The year before, he'd ridden his motorcycle out west to Seattle, where he'd worked as a fisherman, and Jennifer and Lenny Jibert were on the lam, hiding out from drug dealers and the law, and at my request and introduction, befriended them. He'd become my connection to her, Jennifer, one person removed from a direct link, respecting her, Lenny's, and now their baby's privacy, but still there with them through him, letters back and forth. She sent me a photo of herself and her baby, sans the daddy, through him (Kabbo: Volume I), so it was not at all a stretch to think Elizabeth might have gone to him, driven by similar energies. My interaction with him that night, though—the intimidating and accusatory manner with which I imposed myself—was the last act in a friendship developed over years and maintained through all of adolescence, the thick and the thin, surviving even the Arizona fiasco. At fifteen, while tripping bad on a tiny half-hit of two-dollar purple THC, smaller than the size of a match head (how can anything that small do anything to me?) and hallucinating terror of endless repetitions

and remoteness, like I was a fading phantom slowly disappearing from the world, I made my way to the always open back door of his parents' big house in the upper scale neighborhood of the cursed Rock, where, unable to speak, he greeted me and immediately understood, then calmly guided me up to his spacious and private third-floor bedroom sanctuary, where I spent the next few hours motionless and in silence, unable to speak and with nothing to say anyway, listening to Peter Townsend's masterpiece *Tommy*, performed by the London Symphony Orchestra, while the drug gradually wore off and a semblance of sanity eventually returned, his quiet, steady friendship and strength grounding me all along. But now, after the futile and desperate search concluded, not only did I not find her there, after he humored and defused me by letting me in to check and finally overplaying my hand, I lost them both entirely and permanently. Everything has an expiration date, even blood brother pals and sexy stripper roommates you went to jail for. That night, somewhere very sad between Long Beach and Freeport, between that painful discovery and the subsequent ugly visit, were all three of ours.

Still at the Goldberger's - summer part II

"Wounded deep in battle I stood stuffed like some soldier undaunted – to her Cheshire smile I stand on file she's all I ever wanted"
– For You, Bruce Springsteen, (1973)

With all that, the melodrama and piercing pain of a rough romance abruptly ended, and, after a respectfully brief pause of hours, maybe even a day or two, it was still summer, and I still had a "love shack" only blocks from the beach and plenty of time to kick it back into gear—plenty of sand, sunshine, and ocean time for the resumed 24-Hour Game to now take back its rightful position on the center stage of my post-Willow summer of '80 nights and days. Though it hurt, I was able to distract myself with the cornucopia of wild-young bikinis surrounding me only a few steps away. This is really where and when I honed my sharpest skills, adopting as a maxim the legend of the two buffaloes grazing on the edge of the rocky ridge just

above the herd, father and son buffalo, when the son tells his pop, "Let's run down there and fuck one of them, pa'," to which the older replies, "Let's walk down there and fuck all of them, son." So, I walked the boardwalk day and night, on patrol even in the pizza delivery car, with Jimmy D on the wider road, always rolling, now wearing the skin-tight Sassoon jeans, American Gigolo style, and saving for another gold chain. The Police, Bruce Springsteen, D Train... Not that I didn't miss her—the sex, that is, and the illusion of close companionship. I did. Not the torture, though, except for the sexual torture. That was great—the best part—but being positioned as I was, I was able to keep it a busy scene and regain my mojo. Real busy. Even the older, big-bosomed lady who rented the large room between the two small ones wanted a piece of me, a fine artist from the city, a middle-aged painter, *zaftig*, a European woman with boobs as big as a pregnant cow's and a pretty smile, so it was under consideration. And one of the Goldbergers' daughters? The quiet brunette with the pale skin and dark eyes wearing long sleeves and modest dresses, about seventeen? The one whose occasional quick glance in passing on the stairs I caught and returned? Well, you know, "*she was just seventeen; you know what I mean.*" So, naturally, there was a non-stop flow of interest on many fronts. To me, though, at nearly twenty-two, she was just one of the many varied ornamental ladies decorating and sometimes populating my world that summer; desirable, for sure, but not available, for certain; another maxim coming into play: not where one eats. But from the boardwalk to the bedroom? That was my preferred straight line, with green lights on both ends, and I traveled it often, again and again, as often as I could until beyond summer's end, when the artist left the large room to return to her regular place in the Village or Chelsea, somewhere in the city, and I moved in, taking her spot. Now I could host in a much more spacious studio, one with its own refrigerator and sink and brighter windows, and so I proceeded to mark the territory with a hand-painted wall mural, a practice I learned from my father back in Brooklyn, who was, by the way, actually quite artistic with a steady hand and a creative mind, so, there was that too.

Growing up, my dad, maybe my mom too, kinda' beatnik types, painted murals on our apartment walls in Brooklyn, not Sistine Chapel-style, but kids' stuff, cartoon animals, and the like, so the idea of painting on

apartment walls appealed to me, and this room had a rather large bare one running the length of the room facing the large window with the southern exposure, facing the sea. I don't recall a view of the water; we weren't quite high enough but I do recall the light and how it illuminated that wall, washing it in bright sunlight for much of the long day, and so I was struck with an inspiration: the Silver Surfer. Yeah, my favorite superhero straight outa' Marvel Comics. Not exactly a Michaelangelo-style inspiration, more like a Stan Lee one, but it worked for me, so I went at it, clearing space and sketching him out flying through outer space on his cosmic surfboard with a pencil. The drawing filled most of the wall between the room's entrance door and the smaller window and alcove facing the rising sun in the east, nearly from floor to ceiling. It's not exactly a difficult draw. Easy lines, colors, and curves; limited complexity and detail and the larger scale actually makes it easier. The project could be mastered without much sweat and left open a space for personalized style and creativity, for example, using silver nail polish instead of paint to fill him in. I thought the nail polish would reflect the light with more of a metallic glow, and within a few days, the *Surfer* was guiding me, and my masterpiece was complete. It's not clear if I got the go-ahead or not from Mrs. G. but I probably did. She was not a gal I wanted to mess with or cross, aside from her being my landlady and the matriarch of a large brood of cohesive family members. Once, soon after we had just moved in, she happened to be discussing with me her early relations with one of her neighbors and offered an anecdote to set the tone for me. She told me that when the family first moved in about a decade ago, they were the only observant Jewish family on the block, and one of the neighbors, a homeowner, made some sort of threatening comment to her, suggesting a pogrom or worse, as a possibility to come in response to the Goldberger's presence. To this, the sturdy Mrs. G. responded that if she ever thought anything like that even looked like it might happen, Mrs. Goldberger would pay her neighbor a visit first. Right away, first thing. It worked for me. She was a hefty woman, green eyes flashing under her customary wig, cool and calm, confident and determined, not given to exclamatory or dramatic flair, so in my book, she got the benefit of any preliminary, proforma doubt. There was no observable gap between her words and her deeds, so I got it. *Don't push her.* Case closed.

Back to the cursed Rockaway bridge

Now that I'd gotten myself set up again, similar to how things were before leaving for my collapsed Sunshine State escapade, the time seemed ripe to back up a little and check in on my ol' pal Jimmy from the navy. I hadn't been to or even thought much of Rockaway since my ignominious departure from New York roughly six months earlier. Back in trucking, 24-Hour Game at full throttle and a pocket of barroom cash from the pizza delivery shenanigans, it felt a lot like time to head back and say hello, maybe even meet back up with the diamond-hard-cobra looking guy in black leather, this time perhaps under more favorable terms, sober and in the daylight, and see how an unannounced reunion like that plays out. Anyway, one afternoon, towards the end of summer, I traveled back to Howley's with a head full of the details I was gonna fill Jimmy in on since we last spoke. We hadn't kept in contact, no real need to, both busy crossing different paths, no problem. How I traveled that afternoon or what exactly prompted it just then was unclear and even less important, but I went alone, a solo trip for certain, and the standout is clear: what happened when I got there, opened the door to Howley's Rockaway Beach chateau, and asked for the whereabouts of my good buddy Jimmy Hickey from the navy? The few local patrons drenched in shadow at the small corner booths by the pool table that otherwise bright summer day turned to me, squinting from the darkest corners, when the one patron seated at the bar asked, "Who're you? (Pause.) You didn't hear?" Another voice from the shadows confirmed, "Brother's boy?" to which I nodded, "yeah, Jimmy Hickey, my pal from the Navy," "oh, he drowned. Sorry. They found him in the channel one morning; he jumped from the bridge last month; musta' hada' few too many that night; that blackberry brandy grabs you by the nuts before you know it and it don't let go," another suggested. "No, it was before that, just after Memorial Day, wasn't it?" "No, no, that was the wake," answered the bartender, again not Bill Howley who probably woulda' had a bit more tact, igniting a discussion there was no reason to stick around for. A sudden anvil on my head—a direct hit. Once it was certain and clear that Jimmy Hickey, my true and good friend was gone, I turned around and left. Goodbye, Rockaway. Goodbye, Howley's. Goodbye for good. I didn't stop to wet my whistle either. Nope, fuck it, just fuck it; no appetite, not even for booze, so I pulled

anchor and set course back to Long Beach, stunned and in slight denial (Could it be another Jimmy? Oh G-d, why? Maybe another "Brother"?), back to America's Healthiest City, to the Goldberger's, the Silver Surfer. This, like with Kaluga, I never saw coming; no depression, no rage, no sorrow, no loneliness—nothing that dark could be seen at all, felt, or even imagined. He had Mary, family, the navy, a church, a union, talent, friends, good looks, smarts, charisma and health, so he would never feel pressured to jump off that cursed bridge, not on a challenge or a dare, even after I did. So what? He didn't need to impress anyone like that and never tried to. If he said *no* and took a pass on something, there was a good reason. He'd sooner crush your head and step on your face than succumb to any pressure from peers or hangers-on. Jimmy was the guy who proclaimed he never lost a fight, and I believed him, especially after that night with Mary watching him fight at his Aikido school, tearing through opponents with a flurry of roundhouse kicks like they were claw hammers tearing through piñatas, one after the next. He never lost—until he did with that high bridge and cold current. Maybe he was drunk. I didn't ask; I didn't need or want to know. It didn't matter anyway. He was gone. He checked out. It felt like, without actually knowing any more than I did, I already knew enough about the *why*. It was between Jimmy, the bridge, and his Maker—something deep, something crazy, something his alone. That was the end of that day, another final expiration, the end of that particular dream of a trustworthy and capable *Frank Nitti*-style lieutenant I could count on to watch my back while I moved us all forward in the trucking business and ahead in life. Rest in peace, sailor. Your kindness, loyalty, and respect are not forgotten, and neither is that early morning attempt to get past you guarding the gangway on that distant shore. In my book, you retire undefeated until just before the very end, when few of us can ever boast so audaciously and so true. I'd have to console myself with my ever-expanding stable of girlfriends and new friends—a few of the other young tenants, good guys, fun guys, and cool guys, no doubt, but not at all lieutenant material, as few are.

The big room

On the second floor lived two other single guys, local Latino chaps who shared a bathroom and a refrigerator lodged between their two rooms:

street-savvy Angel Perez and bespectacled Juandy, clean-cut blokes but with an edge. Angel had that Larry Storch look, Corporal Agarn, but not comedic. Though he could laugh, even at himself, crack a smile and tell a joke, and though he never let me see, I assumed he could throw fists too. It's even quite possible that he could use a blade too if cornered. That was the vibe I got, though; there was a deadly rage lurking there somewhere. It's also possible that this was a projection of the same thing lurking in me. Whatever, anyhow, he was definitely another ladies' man, and we'd occasionally prowl the boardwalk as a tag team. Sometimes it's easier for two to meet up with two; there's much less pressure, and no one gets left out. We were good complements to each other, both physically and temperamentally, very close in size, weight, and build; he was darker, Mediterranean-looking, and I was lighter, more northern European, like the Caucasians, so between us, we covered a nice range. He worked a few towns away in Freeport with kids, like in daycare or an after-school center for troubled kids or teenagers, and it fit. He could take command, having a natural air of confidence, and calm authority, but without overdoing it, especially with kids. He didn't really have to, instead leading mostly by example. Good guy. The second dude, Juandy, was more like a textbook nerd or a Radio Shack store manager type, but he was also cool. He'd still party but spend most of his time working, sleeping, or with his girlfriend, and a third guy, Ricky Rivera, from back in the eating club days, who didn't live here among us but was a frequent visitor, a companion of the other two, making them a trio of friendly bachelor Latinos. This Jimmy was an authentic rogue if ever there was one. The dude looked like he could co-star with Brando, an Anthony Quinn in *Viva Zapata* type but quieter and for real, not pretend, like movie actors. Rogue because he was not only a lady's man but a cool, calm, and collected professional outlaw as well, truck hijacking being his specialty. The Long Beach local, probably born in the P.R. or D.R., and had a Jewish girlfriend back in the Rock, of all places. She and I knew each other from there, and things were okay like that between us, friends of friends, and I had little or no hots for her, so it was cool. Soon after the end of summer, maybe even Labor Day weekend, me and my kid sister would throw a nighttime party in our family backyard, and she and Jimmy, along with the rest of my Long Beach pals, were welcomed guests. This, by the way, would be the same party where big, stupid Jerry

the Douchebag, the two-bit barroom bully, would be the hired keeper at the gate. Anyway, Rivera, the rogue, idolized her, his girl, Marla or Marsha, or something like that. Her parents, though? Middle-class, straight, suburban homeowners with high school and college-aged kids? They weren't fantastically thrilled by her selection, but they had to tolerate him; their daughter was in love with her movie-star-lookin' Latino bad-guy rogue, and there wasn't anything they could do about it except make it worse by forbidding it or hassling her too much, and around them, in fact, around all, he was a gentleman, probably even to the truckers he robbed. Smart. One night, I was alone, drinking beer and watching TV, when he knocked on my door at about nine or ten, so I let him in. He was holding something that looked like a heavy duffle bag draped over his arm. Entering the room, he goes straight to my bed, drops the bag, zips it open, and spreads out the contents: brand-new brown and black leather, hip-length coat jackets, about ten of them, maybe more, and the room is suddenly saturated with that great fresh leather smell, offering me my pick from them gratis. A score. He did "scores." The generous rogue even offered to take me along next time, assuring me it was all set up, an insurance thing, no one gets hurt, the pistol was only a prop, it was real only if things went very, very badly, and, as a last resort, but everyone got a piece, so that was highly unlikely, we'd merely be going through the necessary motions for the requisite police report. Since I was just beginning my own trucking jobs mostly given to me by Jimmy D, with others trickling in through word of mouth and having fun making very decent cash at it, there was no justification for that type of risk. So I picked out a jacket before politely but gratefully declining the job offer—for now. Besides, in all truth, I was much too fucking crazy even for that.

As *Pennysaver* ads were bought and run, offering the services of a "*man with van*" boldly claiming to cover the (entire) "*eastern seaboard*" and a phone number, the business cards were printed, boasting the same, while introductions were steadily being made by a mom looking out for her son. She transformed herself from an unfulfilled and dependent housewife into a busy and successful New York interior designer, having started back in Brooklyn while still married to my dad, now a long-time MIA, well over a decade ago, so, along with encouragement from Jackhammer Dave, connections for her twenty-two-year-old, hard-working boy with midtown

business owners and busy Manhattan showroom managers were there to be made. These outfits dealt mainly in custom furniture, artwork, lighting, antiques, and the like, and they led me to craftsmen and vendors, shops, and other designers with similar contacts and connections, all operations that could definitely always use another reliable delivery service, and so I was working it too, gung-ho, full-commitment to success, just as the booze-fueled rage driven by a nihilistic madness and despair was setting in deeply and, like that blackberry brandy, gaining a suffocating grip.

The big party

It was the second party we hosted at the Rock. Unlike the first well-attended hootenanny two or three years before, indoors in winter, also co-hosted by my kid sister, this was an end-of-summer backyard bash. We decided it wouldn't be a formal night, no guest list, instead we'd go for basically an open house or open yard for anybody in our age ranges that we knew or knew us from town, across the street, down the block, new people, old friends, and classmates, work and play, Tom Levi from Amalfi who brought along his date, Big Richie, with his biker brother Al with his intrepid girl Jill, *Buttercup* and her gal pals, the O'Brians from across the street, Greg, that brooding but cool guy on Jimmy D's crew from down the street who was pals with Hannibal and Douchebag and dated my sister's best friend Maggie O'Brian, Angel, Juandy, and, of course, Rivera the rogue and Marsha, Bob Lang, the motel manager, Espo, Jenny Brande and her friends, even the victim showed up, and I half expected Swiss Tom, the doctor's son, to come by and offer to make *zumzing*. Even pipe smoking Jimmy D dropped by for a quick beer and a hello. I was pleased to see every single one, and it kinda surprised me to see how popular the two of us actually were, especially me with my unsavory reputation. Anyway, folks from wherever were in and out for hours, and being that I was just now the proud new owner of a gently used, solid, and sturdy white Dodge cargo van and already making a few regular dollars with it, it fell to me to buy, pick up, and deliver the ten cases of Heineken, which, together with Jerry the stupid bouncer, shirtless under his blue jean suspenders and red bandana like a Long Island li'l Abner (he'd get a case as compensation), and half the crowd

of attendees, were my contributions. Little sister handled the rest, like inviting her friends, who invited their friends, and so on, as the groups mixed and overlapped, maybe a hundred or more different guests over the course of a few hours. It was great partying outdoors in the late summer warmth with friends and acquaintances from different and varied spaces of life, here all together now, sharing a common bond, all friends of either mine or hers, many times of both, and living joyfully, "I'll be your savior, steadfast and true, I'll come to your emotional rescue..." in that brief moment of music, laughter, dance, romance, moonlight, and booze under the stars. And though there was no drama, no fights, no cops, and no damage, there was plenty of Heineken left over—at least four or five cases, which, after the bash ended, were quickly packed back up into my trusty van and delivered to exactly where they belonged: besides the refrigerator in my new studio apartment on the cursed edge of southern Rockville Fucking Center.

It was sometime during that August of '81, just before or just after Labor Day weekend, already rolling with my own wheels, paid for with a passbook loan taken out in my name and backed up by Ma's deposit, and with Jimmy D's sustained encouragement ("I'll give you plenty of jobs; I have more than I can do"), while still working part-time for him and an assortment of other part-time, keeping busy money-making activities like driving a passenger van at night for the local RVC motel Lang managed ("Would *you like a drink?*" he quietly asked one night in his windowless office before I made a run, "*indeed I would,*" thus pouring me one and cementing a conspiracy of two). That outfit had airline contracts, and the uniformed JFK flight crews needed to be picked up and brought back between trips, so they needed a guy who could really deal with the wheel, meaning, like, well able to comfortably drive half drunk. On one boozy trip, just inside the backroad of one of the airport's more desolate service roads, the crew on board my four-wheeled shuttle and I went into a hydroplaning tailspin similar to my Oldsmobile wreck, which we all handled calmly and adroitly, including the driver, just a bit of *turbulence*, before once again holding steady as she goes, foot off the break, entropy taking hold, and surviving yet another close call. That's when I moved out of America's Healthiest City again, where I'd been back for just over a year, enjoying the steady flow of wine, women, song, ad hoc jobs, and the Silver Surfer's stride while tucked away safely

upstairs at the Goldberger's. Freelance work and freelance fucking, the many temporary lovers attempted to fill a void: a quickie with another Marsha or Marla, daughter of a friend of my mom's; Chicky D, just sprung from a girl's reform school; Buttercup; Suzie Ramos (Angel's ex); and so many forgotten others, soft and sweet and round and complete, the game always on, but my malignant, self-centeredness was now reaching near solipsistic proportions of paranoiac grandeur fueled by delusions of persecution.

Despite the listed positives, it was from there, marked by Willow's departure and John Lennon's sudden and shattering murder, that things accelerated towards a steady and now imminent crash down around me, the voice growing ever more sinister. When you're down, though it may happen, don't count on anyone's help getting up; rather, count on them capitalizing on the opportunity to heap on and profit from abuse. For example, the ad hoc day-job opportunities were mostly of the hellacious type thrust on younger, unskilled but hard-working types, like pushing heavy two-story scaffolding around all day in an indoor catering hall with a guy at the top blowing soundproofing foam and glue to the ceiling; upon being hired, the boss promised either \$3.50 an hour or \$4 for the day's pay, depending on my performance. *Okay, fine*, I thought, *let's go*. At the end of that backbreaking, hand-tearing ten or more or more hour day, after giving it my all, I was handed the former. Fuck that too. Lesson learned. From just about then, and just like that, I packed up the van and moved my precarious act down Long Beach Road, through quiet Island Park and the cursed town of Oceanside, to Windsor Avenue, and the peaceful garden apartment complex and the half-painted, unfurnished semi-subterranean, ground-floor studio with my name on the lease—the place where Arkay Trucking would be officially born, announced with business cards and a Pennysaver bris, you might even say, but nothing of value ever lasted for me in Rockville Center. Nothing. This would prove true here too, expiring even before it had fully arrived.

Pappy's – dangling from the edge

It was a classic seedy, old-man bar in Long Beach (where else?) settled into the quieter east side part of town, the section with more schools and bakeries than barrooms. It faced the spook house I crept out of that rainy night months before and had an end-of-the-world kind of feeling about it, at the edge, beyond only the sand, ocean waves, and night sky, so let's get stewed before the sea swallows us up in a watery Armageddon. Pappy's sat at one end of a north-south cross street ending by the beach entrance beneath the boardwalk. The bar itself, of modest dimensions, with maybe enough seating space for twenty or thirty patrons—not that that was at all likely, hardly ever more than a dozen boozers on even a busy night—was a wooden-framed, elongated, low-rise, one-story shack nested in the boardwalk's shadow right up on its edge, practically fitted just beneath it, separated from the beach proper only by a small patch of sand serving as an empty lot large enough to park two or three cars but, aside from the owners, without any—so it had a kind of rundown, salt-stained, beach bum, dark appeal, at least to me and probably for the similarly describable regulars. It's doubtful that many customers came from any further than two blocks away, as no one outside the neighborhood would even have noticed its existence; it hosted no *battle-of-the-bands* parties or Fourth of July bar-b-ques. The only reason I even knew about it was from my pizza delivery tours when it might have been a stop. Others, the more respectable folk living in the high-rise condos on either side of Shore Road but in the vicinity, would usually steer clear of the dank, almost subterranean dive so as to avoid any guilt by association. But who cares? Not me. Not I, and not a whit. There was no one to impress there or even anyone just thinking about spending time there, that was for sure. That was a given. And I liked it for all its gloomy character and atmosphere. It fit perfectly with how I felt, so that was it—my occasional staging ground.

Long about then, shortly after the move back to the Rock, the idea that I needed another firearm came to me. It wasn't a new thought, of course; that we know; but it was an *again* thought and a steadily growing one. Firearms, particularly rifles, weren't hard to come by; they could be easily purchased legally in many LI sporting goods stores, hunting shops, and obviously in gun shops, where all that was needed besides the cash was a driver's license with a local address, so it didn't take much shopping for me to settle

on a long-barreled, twenty-two-collapsible hunting rifle. Though a twenty-two is not a cannon, granted, it's no .350, a bear at one hundred yards would shrug it off if even noticed, but this black plastic and brushed steel baby could be broken down into the barrel and the chamber mechanism and fit neatly and securely into its own, waterproof stock, similar to the 007 and Man From U.N.C.L.E. toy guns I played with as a kid, but unlike the toys, this baby could kill. And that's what I wanted it for. Mars, the god of war. That's me, baby. No one in particular, that is, at least not right now. I wasn't going after any old, unsettled scores, but instead was simply preparing for the next. The inevitable next, the voice and the line.

A little guy I'd seen around town, a black guy about my size, a disco-party guy that went by the nickname *Martini*, sort of a light-in-the-loafers type of chap, was one of the regular and recognizable denizens of Pappy's, and though there is zero recollection of what may have led up to this, I found myself in the not too unfamiliar and drunken position of being squared off against him in a street-fight stance right outside the bar late one weeknight in the early fall. This time, unlike so many others that began the same way, I decided to strike first, and wham! An open-handed (he was too small for a fist shot), vicious, hard right slap to his upper cheek and temple brought him down before I even got into position to deliver the next. Down he went, landing in what would soon be a puddle of his own piss right there on the sidewalk. No one from the bar even came out to watch the brawl; it was too mundane an event for the two or three drunks inside to budge off their stools at this hour, and the quick knockout was unexpected; they may have been waiting for the fight to develop before getting off the stools to check it out. But when I saw that piss, I got concerned, so I decided to lower the event profile by dragging him from behind, lifting and cradling his upper arms and shoulders in my arms, and dragging him like that across that tiny patch of unused space directly into the shadows under the boardwalk, where so many other forgotten ghosts probably hovered over unmarked graves. The guy was out like a light, probably just as shitfaced as I was, but at least now I could see him breathing, like already snoring, like fast asleep, so next thing I decided, rather than just leaving him there out-cold under the boardwalk as if it were just one of those things, waking up like that, like in a junk-yard truck cab or in a police lockup cell, beat-up, hung over, and in

need of bail, I'd help myself to whatever he had in his pockets for causing me all this trouble. Whatever his wallet held by way of paper cash, a few dollars at most, was now mine as compensation for my time, and with that score, I headed back to my parked, white getaway van and off in it to the cursed Rock I drove. It was during that trip back when I imagined my henchman driving while I used the rifle to fire from the bed of the truck out through the open back doors at any possible pursuer, Gatling gun style, only a manual, single-action. Though not automatic, it would get the job done if I had the will to use it. That, in addition to building a trucking empire and growing my stable, was my current and perhaps ultimate fall project—nurturing that paranoia-fueled will.

But it wasn't all war. There was love too, and lots of it. Making love, that is, not the same as being loved or being in love, more like sport-fucking for fun, that was clear, but no matter, I kept busy, very busy. In fact, those couple of months in that new residence were among the busiest of my young life up to that point, managing a dynamic stable of young ladies, rotating them regularly, waking up each morning thinking about which lucky lass was gonna get the call that afternoon. Would it be big-boobed Cindy from Oceanside, curvy Mary who liked to bite from Hempstead, Paddy the chef, Buttercup, or Chicky D? My mother's housekeeper, Elida? No one was safe; no one was exempt. Maybe I'll find and add a new one before tonight rolls around. For sure, I'd be looking, always at the game, clock always running. The steady stable of about a dozen or so needed maintenance, as some might drop out and others—new blood—would need to be added. It was a regular routine, like the speed of light but not quite so fast, a constant. If it was female and breathing, it was a target.

Once upon a time, a year or two before, at a fancy hotel in Philadelphia for a big bar mitzvah for the son of one of my mother's close grade school friends, she and I, the belle of the ball, were dancing together during a slow one, which was supposed to be no more than a joyful, nostalgic, and family-friendly *Color My World* moment of closeness. About halfway through the song, the young man she was dancing close with started slobbering on her neck, burying my face in the nape, then letting go with / My feelings never mattered in that circle. Never even came up. Anyway, the female conductor,

the one punching the tickets, got some lovin' too, between the cars, and though neither of these last two attempts ever came to actual fruition, they kept my battery charged and motor running, and there was always, always, always the next.

My team and the big time

It was a silver satin warm-up jacket with crimson-red embroidery, like they wore in the dugout, a replacement for the long-lost M.C. Fox varsity jacket, and had the words Arkay Trucking stitched to the back in red with an italicized Rob in front above the left breast. It was real '80s style, and still only that year, 1981, like the Sasson jeans and gold chains, an otherwise rare instance of being up with the fashion pack at twenty-two. Either way, ahead or at par, it was a unique statement and an essential part of my startup gear: I was here to get into the game and play. Batter up. So, what if my bachelor pad apartment was still only half painted when I slept, er, passed out on the drop cloth covering the sleep-sofa bed I somehow acquired? But good old, generous Jeff Aaronson was hired to paint it; it was his problem now, and sooner or later he'd probably get the rest done. Anyhow, it didn't bother me. The jacket was cool, and there were more interesting things to attend to—even the Heineken cases stacked up by the refrigerator were much more important—they were intact and in full. When they ran out, if necessary, and at times it was, I'd hunt for loose change between the seat cushions, where all I'd need to find was 99 cents for a six-pack of warm Knickerbocker from the local distributor five minutes away. Who says Jews aren't alcoholics? If I wasn't, well, this was a damn good impersonation of one, as they assured me at the weekly group therapy sessions I was sentenced to after my Long Beach DWI (or DUI?) conviction a few months back. Who the hell were they anyway? By five p.m., the first bottle was cracked open, and by eight, at one just about every half-hour, I was ready for the evening, either going out or staying in, depending on which lady was up that night and exactly where that was at. Perhaps it might be a night out on the hunt, the clock ticking. But whoever and wherever, the boozing was steady, as was the trucking work, and busy is as busy does, but not busy enough to keep me sane.

Elegant Mike Kempler owned a three-story furniture showroom on Fifth and Twenty-first, with each floor covering the entire building layout and offering its own style and flavor. For that part of town, two blocks from the Flatiron, it was a massive operation, and my flavor was money, work, and money for which there was another fit. His outfit supported about ten salespeople, a floor staff, a bookkeeper, and who knows how many other supporting contractors and vendors, so there was always a lot of action about and around. This was the big time. The city. People with money need a place to spend it and stuff to spend it on, and that's where an outfit like his fits nicely. After all, what's better than making your home comfortable and inviting? Not much. He and my mom were close work associates. She'd bring him her client's business, and get commissions from whatever they spent. They both did all right, and fortunately for me, I was included. Of course, an outfit of that size had a contract with a full-time and much bigger trucking company in Queens, with their own warehouse that regularly received, stored, and delivered Mike's stock, but having another guy with enough muscle, talent, integrity, and dependable wheels who could be relied on to cover the gaps? No doubt about the value there. Not in his industry. In fact, I soon realized that everyone used trucks. Everyone and everything, and usually more than once. So, you'd have to be a complete idiot or totally asleep at the wheel not to be able to make money with one, and I was neither. I was just insane, like War's "slippin' into darkness..." coulda' been my life's theme song, but he didn't know that. That first day, when he spotted me through all the assembled clutter of furniture and home decor paraphernalia, entering the main showroom's floor through the freight elevator deep at the back end, me with my sturdy, young helpers, and in my silver satin jacket, this tall, lean, gray-haired, bespectacled gentleman came all the way back there from up at the front office by the main elevators to greet me, where the first thing he said was to ask if he could play on my team. He was referring, of course, to my jacket, so we both laughed when I answered that, sure, he could captain and manage as well if he wanted, I just wanted to get out in the field and play. And so, with that light-hearted exchange was struck the beginning of a long-time relationship that became both a friendship and a mutually beneficial business alliance. Mr. Kempler had two sons about my age, decent boys, but both of whom he knew had grown up in cushy Scarsdale with most of the hard work in life already done

for them; all they'd have to do was not fuck up. Me, on the other hand? I was going to have to sweat for a living and was willing to do it, hustle, and largely on my own, and that he respected.

With Kempler informally contracting deliveries out to me a few times a month, good jobs, nice jobs, no problems being paid jobs, a handful of quality others mom connected me with, similar drills, along with Jimmy D's help and my Pennysaver ads, I was rolling in the delivery/moving business, Arkay Trucking (long hand phonetics for my two primary initials), right from the start, if not actually from day one. The bottom line was making money and getting paid, if not in cash then in checks, fine as long as they were made out to me in my proper, legal name so the bank would take them. Their bookkeeping was their business, and mine was mine. Arkay Trucking was just a shorthand nickname, something to print on my business cards, for the answering machine, and for the Pennysaver ads. I thought, as it's just getting started, let's keep it simple for now. First, let's see where this goes. Until then, there's no need for cumbersome, complicated, and possibly unnecessary but expensive bureaucracies like incorporations or even DBAs just yet. For the vehicle though, the truck, I succumbed to the pressure of plates, registrations, inspections, and the much-demanded insurance. The checks, though? They are payable to me, the guy that just performed the service and brought you your living room set, the guy you're handing it to, Robert Kabakoff. Me. Thank you; it's nice and simple and headed right to the bank.

The too big sofa and a just right bed

At the start, most of my local work was coming from the big plumbing supply outfit aptly enough named Acme Plumbing Supply Company, or simply Acme Plumbing for short. I guess the owners wanted to make it clear that's who they were, so that's what they did—nothing fancy or unnecessary. They were a conveniently located major supplier to the trade, and there were deliveries nearly every day. Somehow, I connected with them, probably through the Pennysaver ad at first, and soon, reliable Arkay Trucking became one of their regular independent delivery services; small

jobs, cartons filled with fittings and hoses, PVC and lead pipe bundled and wrapped, nothing very complicated or fancy there either, and for me, it was just a pick-up and a drop-off and collecting the bill at the end of the term for my services. Easy work. Stressless. A few dollars here and a few more there helped keep me rolling, and the manager, Fred, a middle-aged, hard-working family man, was a black guy from the area with that slow southern accent you can't miss. I'd hear his voice on the answering machine: "*Rob, this is Fred from Acme Plumbing,*" and it would light up my ears. It sounded like I was establishing myself. Serious business people, adults, were treating me like I was one of them. Arkay Trucking was coming to life right in front of me, like watching a chick hatch from an egg. They didn't know the rest, the slippin' into darkness kid, and it just sounded so great.

There weren't really a lot of opportunities to hit on many ladies in the construction supply trade, so no surprise there. Maybe an occasional secretary here, a luncheonette counter girl there, or a bookkeeper somewhere else—but that's about it, and if they were even cute, they were usually married or engaged, so the prohibitive hassles were not worth the inherent headaches. But from the rest of the industry? In the city? Holy macaroni! Manna from Heaven. There were ladies all over the place: everyone from luxury apartment-living housewives with their college-age daughters and their friends to saleswomen and their clients and all their friends and associates, like lady interior designers and art dealers, and even the occasional Pennysaver score. It was like there was some type of beauty test or standard that had to be met before females were permitted onto the island of Manhattan, all 8s, 9s, and 10s, a driver's license and a headshot. Seriously.

All that said, unsurprisingly, the first was soon enough, only weeks after beginning, when a certain Lisa McRae called to ask if the man with the van could help her move a large sofa already in her apartment from one room to another. The problem, she explained, was that the earlier movers told her it was too big to fit the angles necessary to get it through the adjoining hallway and doorway to where she wanted it placed, clearly a job for a dedicated expert and a can-do fella like me. Lisa was another African American lass, either a school teacher or an administrator, something like

that, with her own apartment in, you guessed it, Long Beach, and she was young, single, and cute. Bingo. The solution to her sofa problem was risky but doable: for the modest sum of approximately seventy-five dollars, I would hoist the piece out of the living room window, which was large enough (with proper handling) to fit it through, then, using an attached heavy rope cable suspended from the building roof (her apartment was on the top floor of a six-story), maneuver the too-big sofa slowly eastward towards the room she wanted it in, the bedroom, by the necessary number of feet, where a second team of two on the inside would pull it back in through that window, which was the same size as the living room's. Fun! Right? Damn right. And so we got it to work and got it done without breaking any windows, tearing any fabric, or even scraping any painted walls. A perfectly executed mission and paid in full. The next time I was back there, a night or two, at most three, later at Miss Lisa's beachside château, the next several times, in fact, it was straight to the bedroom for another purpose entirely, hence my stable was up one and now exquisitely multiracial. But even with all that going for me, there wasn't enough to prevent the man with the van from driving off a cliff, a park bench, a shoe salesman, or death row.

With the nihilistic death-beast now in the driver's seat, there was no tomorrow. Empty beer cans needn't be disposed of; it's fine if they accumulate along with a mountain of unpaid parking tickets, gathering like piles of junkyard debris in the van, in front of the seats, behind them, under them, and in the bed, rolling around and spilling out of the passenger door when opened for its purpose to be served, as it did on a date with probably the cutest new filly to enter my stable in a long time, young Joanna Kokozetos, a tiny, little, built just right, big-eyed-girl from the next town over who from seated atop a barstool flashed those deep, baby browns at me just once, and that was that. The young lady would make for another fine, fine addition, pulled from, surprise, surprise, the New Village Inn, where once again, during the brief period at the garden apartment studio, it became an occasional stop on my night flight agenda. So cute was she, forgiving the trailer-park trash that my van had now become, that the night when I drove us to the city to see the Simon and Garfunkel concert in Central Park, arriving hours early so as to get a decent spot by the stage,

and she blew it all up, I forgave her too. After securing a pretty good one, maybe only fifty yards away, and as the massive waves of throngs continued to descend, filling up the Great Lawn beyond capacity, she quietly announced her immortal words: *"I have to go to the bathroom."* which I tried to ignore, or at least downplay. *"Now? Are you joking? Please tell me you are just kidding. Please tell me you are only trying to show me how easily you can ruin my day by merely uttering a single sentence. Please, Joanne. Pretty please, say it ain't so."* By her third appeal, it became obvious and undeniable that she was not, and we were gonna have to leave to accommodate nature, which meant this was to be one historic concert that, despite the advance planning and preparation, we would both miss. She was too cute to even be angry with, so there was still a human, though flickering, heart beating somewhere inside the beast.

By now, though, going out often means going out armed. Carrying a rifle, though, if only back and forth across the quiet street from the parking lot to the entrance of my apartment building, even a collapsed one, is not exactly an exercise in appropriate discretion, even to a dangerously warped mind like mine. Clearly, something had to be done, perhaps a modification to the design. If I even knew doing so was specifically illegal, it was unlikely to have changed anything in my world (my world, my rules, simple and straightforward enough); anyway, who knew that filing down the serial number, then cutting the barrel down to a two-inch nub and the rear of the stock, separating it with a hacksaw from the grip, was even an issue, never mind a crime, a felony, who? I mean, it was my property, right? Certainly not this nihilistic death-beast, imagining he's Al Capone's protege, a budding hitman. The beast had the final word: you own it; it's your property to do with what you choose, which, of course, includes using it for its primary intended purpose and all of that at my sole discretion. This method of transportation is far superior. Smaller and less visible was better, though it was still too thick to be pistol-sized discrete, meaning easily concealable, which it was not, but now at least somewhat concealable in the front of my pants waist behind a snapped-up, silver-satin jacket with my name embroidered in red. The snaps could quickly be unsnapped if exposure or drawing was required, so in that sense, it was a good enough solution to address any specific or general threat that might be suddenly encountered

at the New Village Inn or while protecting young Joanne. That guy I banged into in Long Beach, gave the finger to, and fled from? The guy whose sister I slapped, the Golden Glover from the West End that shattered my face? The IRA? The KKK? Nazis? They were out there somewhere, possibly nearby at the next turn, in line at the gas station, at the next red light, or at the next convenience store. Who knows? And surely there were others, known and unknown, for whom preparations were needed, both mentally (by drinking) and physically (by arming). So the death-beast had all the necessary bases covered. When the final High Noon showdown comes? I'll be ready and ready to go for broke.

It may have been the day of the party, or it might have been just a day or two before, but it was close. An afternoon knock on the door came from the building superintendent, Mr. Masterson, an older chap just about my father's age. In fact, he was the father of a crazy lady wild-child classmate of mine, one of the coolest, leather-wearin' blond-haired badass chicks in all of junior high school with a scar under her left eye, making her look even cooler, who by high school had mostly disappeared; who knew where or how? Anyway, by now, I far outpaced her and her whole gang in recklessness and anti-socialism. This trim, gray-haired, half-drunk super and I were never too chummy with each other to begin with; no reason, it's just like that at times, 'bad blood,' like at the Arizona or with Alversa below deck, and his paternal credit bought him no slack, so this time, when he knocked on my half-painted studio door, he let his disdain show by abruptly ordering me to lower my music. Folks were complaining, he barked. "Really? Fuck you!" came my quick, witty and succinct reply. Then, as soon as he turned around to walk away, maybe to call the cops or more likely to have another drink, I added an exclamation point by giving him a solid kick square in the ass *goodbye*. The old stooge just kept walking like he didn't want to bother, which was great because I woulda' torn his throat out of his neck and until today never heard back, which was also a good thing too, because tonight, just up the stairs two flights, was going to be a party where I and my friends and neighbors, along with one of my steady fillies, Buttercup, and her friends, were gonna make a lot more noise, and it wasn't just gonna be loud music; we were going to light up the quiet Rockville Fucking Center night. Exactly how wasn't crystal clear, but that it would

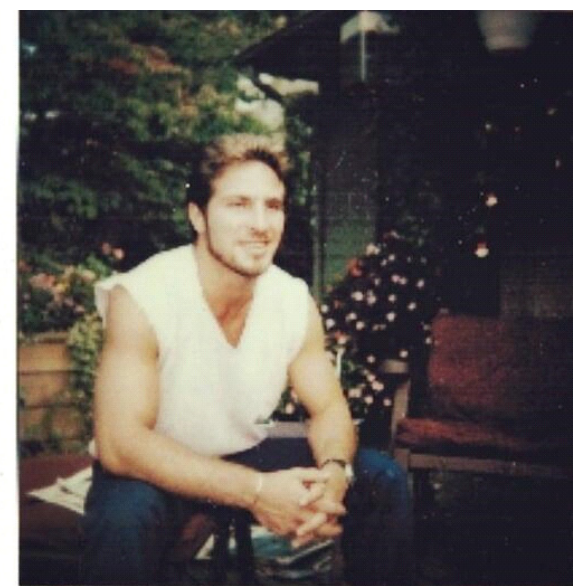
happen? One way or another, High Noon was coming, the end was nigh, it surely was, as I was now quite ready and fully prepared to bring it on.

The end of the line

At first, I thought they might just take away the gun and give me a good, strongly worded lecture on avoiding firearms while imbibing. Wishful, delusional thinking in the first degree to which I would plead *nolo contendere* but that wasn't among the charges. The charges were reckless endangerment, a misdemeanor and felony possession of an altered firearm. After a night back in the county seat police detention cells, Al Capone's former protege was held in custody on a hundred thousand dollar cash bail in Nassau County. That meant that I'd be there again, back at NCCC, and this time who knew for how long? I was anticipating the likelihood of years, upstate this time, the big house, big time, the line ending there, one way or another just a short step to death row. No, they had nothing to say aside from the talk about the line and where it was headed, nothing to say, they didn't even ask. No, no more cops, no questions, no visits from detectives, no psychiatrists, no 7/30/30 Tests, no real victims either, only a probable perpetrator, and he was safely off the streets, so there was no reason for them to sweat it. Though maybe a police blotter report in the Rockville Center News Owl, not such a big-big case in the grand scheme, but they weren't letting it go either. Nope. They had the gun, but only a single witness, Douchebag himself, a *maybe* with a jury, they'd probably see him for what he was, a two-bit arrogant bully who mighta' fired the shot himself, so there was built in *reasonable doubt*, especially without a statement from me, nothing, for once shutting my usual big mouth, and I had a 'street lawyer'. Ma' came through again, but in any event, I knew it was time to settle in. Over the course of the jail term, a year, a 'bullet' in jailhouse speak, minus a possible four month break for 'good time' it would dawn on me that if I ever got any type of play, any at all, eventually I'd get out and then have to make some hard choices about where my life was headed and who was actually responsible for what, like, for example, *me for everything*, all of it, or I'd have to settle in here, a convict life-style, start lifting weights,

squeezing dried eggs from a hole torn in a plastic T-shirt bag down my throat for protein bulk and tattooing up. Treading a thin line back and forth between victim and perpetrator was the lifestyle choice that got me there, a place I didn't really care to be again (too late for that) or anymore (not too late for that), but there I was, and again, no one asked because no one cared. It was bullshit. Jail. Incarceration. Living in a cell, no privacy, no dignity, you can't even shit in peace, never mind the danger, degradation and lost opportunity, but again, it's not exactly like you get the option. Al Capone would have posted that bail, Al Capone wouldn't have fired a warning shot. I was hedging and I was reckless, sure, but I wasn't Al Capone—not even in my fantasies anymore. That delusion was laid to rest at arraignment, dead and buried. I was just crazy, spiteful, stupid and drunk, four-of-a-kind and a wild card, the former “man with van serving the eastern seaboard,” or what was left of him after being taken down the night of obedience to the nihilistic death-beast. That voice, that sick, dangerous voice: *get the gun, get the girl, get her out, shoot him if necessary, kill him if that's what it takes, like jumping off that bridge, just do it, aim and fire*, that night of pitiless self-immolation. Nope, no one put up the cash. Instead, I got a bedroll, some toilet paper, a bar of brown state soap, and a rack in a cell. After that, you get what you get. *Welcome back to prison. Where ya' been?* Who? Me? For my trouble and the trouble I caused I got a year, that 'bullet' exchanged for a cop-out Guilty plea to the felony weapon possession charge, which by the time the offer was made, after about four months, the bid was already halfway over counting the possible one-third off for 'good time', so I accepted and ran with it all the way north to the Erie County Penitentiary in Buffalo where I would spend the rest of the winter, spring, and early summer in a massive, old-style prison built just after the Civil War, now with a block for medium-security skid-bidders like me. There, if I managed to survive (even money), I might refocus, take a break from *crazy* and gather some stones together for a change. It was the first time incarcerated that I brought with me a taste of real respect and earned pride, now in a place where I could sit and reflect on it all—my finer dreams, the greater possibilities, the crippling paranoia, my random fits of rage, the malignant resentments, misplaced priorities, grandiose fantasies and exaggerated fears—a place I might find and fix myself without all the external interference and all that self-inflicted hysteria (*“Your problem is that*

you think you're a monster...”), and from there decide things, maybe even change course. I was still just twenty-three; if I survived, I'd be out by summer; I could dry out from the booze and get in shape, girls love a bad boy and the legend of *Kabbo*, for whatever it might have still been worth enhanced, so it wasn't necessarily the end of the line quite yet; not time to give up or surrender to the curse; a place where after lengthy consideration and in-depth examination the path ultimately chosen was now firmly redirected somewhere unknown but beyond the shoe store, the park bench, or death row, rather it would be back towards the possibility of a life of real freedom and independence, a place of dignity, productivity and even respect without having to imagine being someone else, back towards the rebirth of a new me—back, of course, to Arkay Trucking.



Mr. Arkay Trucking, June 1982, Rockville Center, NY

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